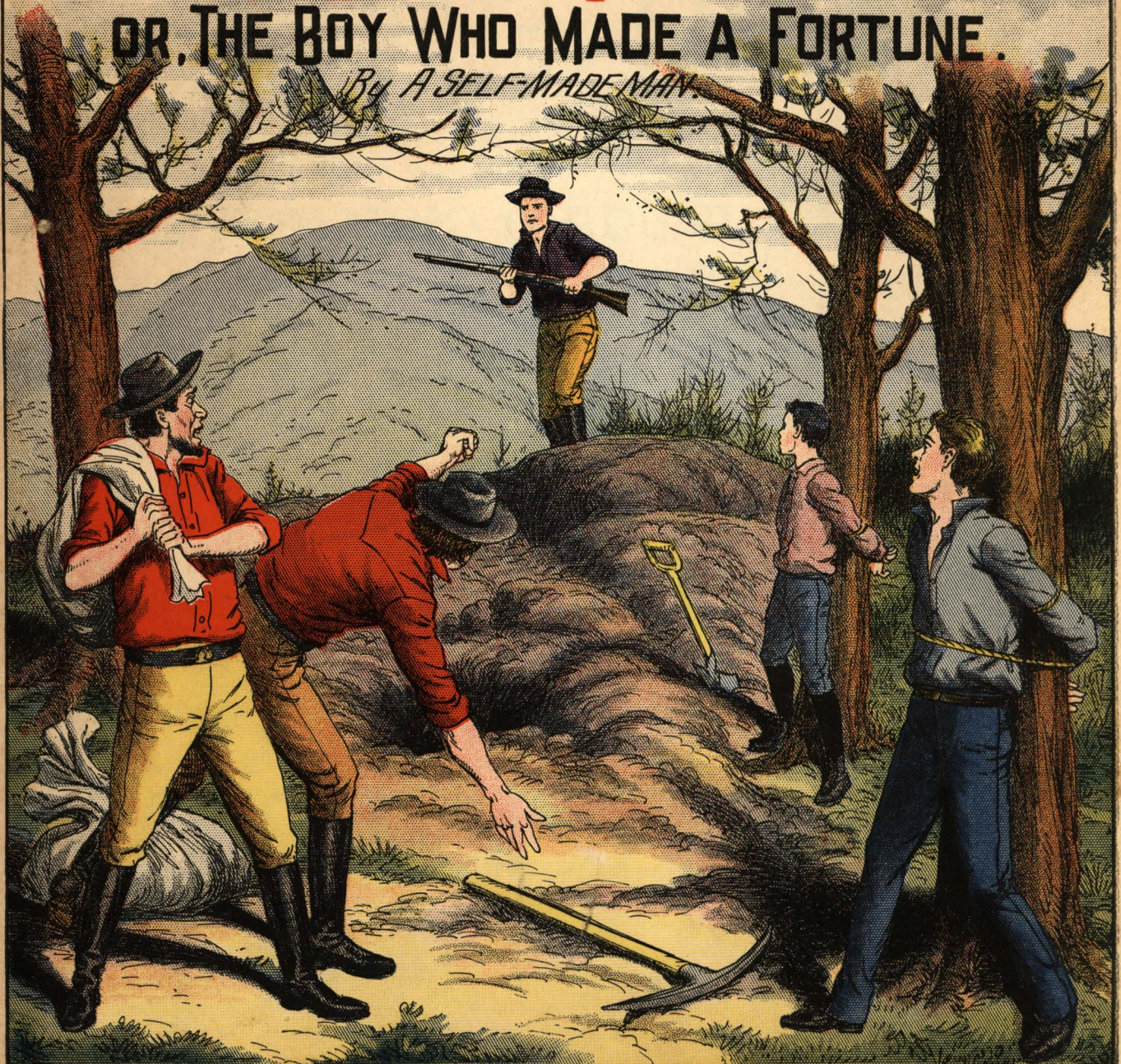


# FAME AND FORTUNE WEEKLY.

## STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY.

### A GOOD THING; OR, THE BOY WHO MADE A FORTUNE.

*By A SELF-MADE MAN.*



The scoundrels, having secured the results of the boys' morning's work, were about to beat a retreat, when Bruce Hardy, rifle in hand, suddenly appeared on the scene. He took in the situation at a glance, and prepared for action.



# Fame and Fortune Weekly

## STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY

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# A Good Thing;

OR,

## THE BOY WHO MADE A FORTUNE.

By A SELF-MADE MAN.

### CHAPTER I.

#### RUINED.

There was a panic on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange.

A prominent railroad stock, which for many days had been boosted from 110 to 160 by the efforts of a big bull clique, had suddenly gone to pieces under a combined attack of the bears.

It was making drops of one and two per cent., and no one could tell where it would stop.

The incessant, strident uproar, aggressive and irritating, which arose from the lungs of a small army of brokers, was suddenly intruded upon by the chairman's gavel, which rang out several times like the clang of a bell.

The noise and fury of the raging combat ceased reluctantly as the members saw that the chairman had a paper in his hand which he was about to read.

The silence which fell upon the assembly was oppressive after the clamor that preceded it, and the voice of the official—clear, sonorous and penetrating—filled every nook and corner of the big room.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am requested to read to you the following communication:

"New York, June 13, 190—.

"Chairman N. Y. Stock Exchange:

"Dear Sir.—I regret to be compelled to inform you that I am unable to meet my engagements. You will please notify the members of the Exchange that they are authorized to close out all contracts with me, either under the rule or at private sale, and oblige,

"Yours respectfully,

"EDWARD HARLOW."

The moment the reading of this announcement of disaster was ended, the maddening babel of voices began again, just as the roar of the tempest continues after a good ship has been engulfed in a stormy sea.

One block away Edward Harlow, a fine-looking man of close on to sixty years, was sitting, with a dazed look upon his aristocratic features, in his elegantly furnished private office overlooking Wall Street.

"Ruined!" he muttered, "irretrievably ruined! Not only every dollar of my own money is gone, but, what is far worse, the whole of my nephew's fortune, confided to my care five years ago, and which I used to stay the tide of disaster to-day, has been swept away and the boy, like myself, is penniless. I was mad to risk the lad's patrimony. Ah! Few know to what lengths men will go in the strug-



gles in Wall Street. How can I face him? How confess to him the awful truth that I, his uncle, in whom his father, my brother-in-law, placed the most implicit confidence, is an embezzler! A robber of the orphan! Gracious heavens! To what pass am I reduced!"

At that moment the office boy tapped on the ground-glass door, and the broker, aroused for the moment, bade him come in.

"Mr. Henderson wishes to see you, sir."

"I will see him."

The visitor was one who had had heavy dealings with Edward Harlow on the floor of the Stock Exchange that day, and had come for settlement.

He was not yet aware that Harlow had failed.

"I am sorry, Henderson," said the ruined broker, in quiet tones, "but I can do nothing for you. I have been forced to the wall by the raid on M. & N. I am cleaned out completely. I am unable to meet my engagements, and my letter to that effect is in the hands of the chairman of the Exchange. Take whatever course you think best under the circumstances."

"I am sorry to hear it, Harlow," said Henderson, with a feeling of sympathy for his debtor. "What are you going to do?"

"Goodness only knows," replied Harlow, in a broken voice.

"Oh, come, brace up! You're not the first, nor will you be the last man ruined in Wall Street. It is a chance we are all taking. You are still sound and hearty, Harlow. You will recover yourself, after the smoke of the wreck has blown away and you see exactly where you stand."

Harlow shook his head sadly.

"No," he said, "this is my finish—my Waterloo."

"Nonsense, man! Remember, there is a silver lining to every cloud."

"I thank you for your sympathy, Henderson. I wish I could see a single rift in the black sky which has overwhelmed me. But I cannot. There is no future for me—none whatever."

"You'll talk differently in a day or so from now," responded his visitor cheerfully. "Go home, man. To-morrow you will be better able to grasp the situation."

With these words Henderson took his leave.

"To-morrow!" murmured Edward Harlow, despairingly. "Will there be any to-morrow for me?"

He turned to his desk and sat there like a statue for half an hour.

Outside in the counting-room the clerks practically quit work, gathered about the desk of the cashier, and talked together in low tones.

They had heard about the slump in prices on the Exchange, and the general impression prevailed that Harlow had been hit hard, but just how hard they could not tell.

They feared the worst, however, and wondered if they wouldn't be looking for jobs elsewhere in a few days.

In the reception-room, Jack Egan, office boy and messenger, sat perched upon his chair, looking out of the window.

He was not yet out of his knickerbockers, being about

twelve years of age, rather young for the position; but for all that he was one of the brightest lads in Wall Street, thoroughly reliable and attentive to his duties.

He lived with his parents in Harlem, and had got the situation through Bruce Hardy, Mr. Harlow's eighteen-year-old nephew.

Bruce and he were excellent friends, though they saw very little of each other, as Hardy was attending a boarding school in New Jersey.

Mr. Harlow, as we have said, sat silent and motionless before his desk for a full half hour.

Then he aroused himself, went to a small, private safe he had in the room, opened it and took a bundle of papers from it.

He sorted them out till he found a particular one, which he laid down beside him, after looking it over.

After that he drew a pad toward him, and for a little while the only sound in the room was the scratching of his pen.

He read the letter over carefully and then signed it with a steady hand.

No one accustomed to the broker's signature would have thought the writer was disturbed by such a thing as business reverses.

He folded the letter and put it, together with the document from the bundle, and a check for the entire amount of his bank balance—\$400—into a long, yellow envelope, which he sealed and addressed in his usual clear style:

"Master Bruce Hardy, Hurricane Hall Military Academy, Middlebrook, New Jersey."

Then he pushed the electric button on his desk and in a moment Jack appeared in answer to the call.

"Take this letter to the postoffice and register it."

"Yes, sir."

"You needn't return, it is already after three."

The boy got his hat and left the office.

A couple of hours afterward, when the janitor's assistant came in to sweep up the office, Mr. Harlow was still at his desk, apparently busy.

The man cleaned up the outside offices and then left the private room for the morning.

As it grew dark Wall Street became deserted.

A few stragglers who had been working overtime, or an occasional pedestrian from below Pearl Street, alone awoke an echo upon the sidewalk.

As the shadows gathered in Mr. Harlow's private office he finally ceased whatever work he had been upon.

He made no move to leave the office nor to turn on the electric light.

As the darkness closed in around his figure the last movement he made was to open an upper drawer in his desk and take something from it and lay it upon the desk.

Whatever it was it seemed to be fairly heavy, and gave out a sharp click before the broker removed his fingers from it.

For a June evening the weather without had turned unusually chilly.

The wind from the distant river soughed up the street.



and made little eddies of the dust heaps and paper collections gathered up by the "white wings" brigade.

About nine o'clock a policeman standing on the corner of Wall and Broad thought he saw a sudden flash in one of the second-story offices on the other side of Wall Street.

It was not repeated.

After he looked a minute or two steadily in that direction he dismissed the idea from his mind.

At that moment a dog somewhere in the neighborhood began to howl dismally.

When the janitor's assistant appeared in the morning to tidy up Mr. Harlow's private office he was startled to see the broker at his desk.

He was bent forward, his head buried in his arms, and the man believed he was asleep.

"I'll bet he hasn't been home all night," said the house employe to himself. "It's after eight now, so I'd better wake him up."

He approached the desk for that purpose, then suddenly stopped and turned deathly pale.

He had seen the glistening barrel of a revolver clutched in the broker's nerveless fingers.

"It can't be that he——"

The words froze on the speaker's lips.

His horrified eyes rested on a dark stain which came from under one arm.

Instinctively his gaze went to the carpet.

A pool of half-dried blood lay between Mr. Harlow's feet.

That was enough for the janitor's assistant.

He didn't investigate further, but rushed downstairs with a white face to find the superintendent of the building who had already arrived on the premises.

The first editions of the afternoon papers had scare headlines and a short story announcing the suicide of Edward Harlow, stock broker, who had shot himself in the office the night before.

As his failure had been printed in the morning papers his death confirmed the rumor of his absolute ruin by the slump in the previous day's market.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE LETTER M.

"Say, Bruce, what do you think?" cried Joe Ramsay, a fine-looking, dark-featured boy of seventeen, bursting, like a small cyclone, into the room occupied by himself and his chum, Bruce Hardy, at the Hurricane Hall Military Academy, in Middlebrook, N. J. "Some of the Highs have actually climbed Dead Man's Ledge and painted a great big capital M on the face of the rock nearly 200 feet above the water line. Now, what do you think of that?"

"I think it was a rather reckless feat," replied Bruce, dropping his feet from their perch on the window-sill to the

floor. "And they have really done it at last, have they?"

"That's what they have. I saw the letter up there myself. So did Al Smith."

"They have made good their boast, then. I really didn't think it was in them."

"Now, Bruce, are we going to let the Highs have the laugh on us fellows?"

"I hope not."

"But they're bound to unless we see them and go them a point better. The news of their exploit I'll bet is all over town by this time. Every time a High meets us after this he'll put his tongue in his cheek and wink his eye, exultantly. Why, just as soon as this gets wind through the academy there'll be the dickens to pay. I tell you, Bruce, something's got to be done. It must be done right away, too, for the term closes in a week, and it will never do for the honor of this school for the fellows to go home leaving that symbol of victory for the Highs to flaunt unmolested all through the summer holidays."

"You're right, Joe. There is only one way of wiping out their triumph, and that is for some of us to climb Dead Man's Ledge and paint a double H above the M."

"That's what! But who's to do it?"

"We must call for volunteers."

"You may put me right down now for one; and if I know Bruce Hardy, and I think I do, he will lead the way," said Joe, enthusiastically.

"You may depend I will, Joe, unless some other chap insists on sharing the glory of such an achievement, in which case I'll have to draw lots for the chance. As the honor of the academy is involved, every student has an equal right to aspire to the honor of leading the way."

"You won't find so many competitors when it comes to the pinch, for it's an awful risky thing, climbing the ledge. It's liable to wind up in a tragedy. If Dr. Parkway gets an inkling of our purpose he'll put the quietus upon the scheme."

"He mustn't know until the thing has been done."

"Of course not. But in order to make sure of that, the plan must be carried out at once."

"Sure thing. Let's go down to the ledge and take a careful survey of the difficulties before us. I'm curious to see just how the Highs managed to do it."

"Come on, then. Al Smith is spreading the news about the grounds. I left him making a bee-line for the gymnasium, where half the fellows are exercising this morning."

Bruce Hardy slapped on his hat and followed his chum to the academy campus.

He was a splendid specimen of young American manhood—strong, alert and sinewy, with light curly hair and well-bred features.

As a matter of fact, he was a born leader, and the rest of the boys in the school recognized him as such.

He was captain of the baseball and football teams, the most skilful rider in the cavalry squad, the captain of Company A, and the best military tactician in the academy.



In mathematics, in fact in all his studies, he stood at the head of his class.

Dr. Parkway, the principal, proudly pointed him out as an example of what Hurricane Hall produced.

Bruce's mother died when he was ten years old, and his father, who left the boy a fortune of something like \$80,000 in gilt-edged securities, five years ago.

His uncle, Edward Harlow, was appointed his guardian, and had control of the lad's property.

He had always taken a warm interest in Bruce, and the boy thought a great deal of him.

As soon as Bruce graduated from a well-known private school in New York City, Mr. Harlow sent him to Hurricane Hall Military Academy.

Now, at eighteen, he was about to graduate, and was slated to complete his education at Princeton.

Joe Ramsay, Bruce's roommate and chum, was not much behind his companion in either pluck, endurance, athletic exercises or scholastic routine.

As a matter of fact, the two boys were well matched.

Joe's father was a wealthy mining promoter, and spent a deal of his time out West.

When the two boys reached the campus they started off in a direction which would bring them to the river about midway between the academy and the town of Middlebrook.

The academy was built on high ground, which continued upward with a gentle slope till it attained a considerable elevation by the river.

These highlands stopped abruptly at a certain point about a mile from the town, and their finish was marked by a treacherous-looking towering mass of rock, partially detached from the main section, and with a sheer descent toward river and road of 300 feet.

It was called Dead Man's Ledge.

It was possible to climb the face of this rock, just as it is possible to ascend the famous Napes Needle, in Windermere, England, but it was well nigh as dangerous.

Such a feat had been the ambition of every daring boy in that neighborhood for years, but it had never been accomplished to any height until now, when some of the high school lads of Middlebrook, after boasting they could and would put the initial of their school at an altitude which should make the military academy students look like two cents from sheer inability to do as well, succeeded in painting a big letter M nearly 200 feet above the river.

"There, you can see it now," said Joe Ramsay, pointing upward toward the dizzy summit of the ledge. "That M must be three feet high."

"It's all of that," admitted Bruce, looking at the big letter critically. "I give the Highs a good deal of credit for that. It was a risky piece of work. Took nerve to stand way up there and paint that. I admire *real* pluck, Joe; and that's a good exhibition of it. Small wonder if the Highs feel in a crowing mood to-day. They've fairly earned the right to hold their heads high."

"That's all right; but we've got to do better than that or haul in our horns good and tight."

"The least we can do is to try and outdo them. The lads who put that M up there have cut out our work for us all right. If you will notice, they got up to the very highest point that it is possible to climb."

"That's so," admitted Joe, in a tone of disappointment. "I'm afraid we can't beat them without letting ourselves down by a rope from above, and that wouldn't count against their method."

"No, that's barred. The thing must be done, if done at all, by climbing up from below."

"But it's impossible for any one, even from that point, to paint a letter higher than that M."

"Impossible is a word that isn't in my dictionary," said Bruce, calmly.

"Do you know of any way by which we can put a double H above that M?" asked his companion, eagerly.

"I do, if you've got the nerve to back me."

"I'll follow your lead anywhere, Bruce. You can depend on me."

"It's a bargain, Joe. You and I will discount that M."

"Tell me how, will you?"

Bruce told him.

Joe started back, aghast.

"Will you dare do that?"

"I mean to try with you to help me."

"I don't know whether I ought to back you that far," replied Joe, doubtfully.

"Not even for the honor of old Hurricane Hall? Why, Joe, it will be something worth while to look back to years from now. Our names will go thundering down through the traditions of the academy. When we're married, and send our own kids here they'll hear about what their fathers did in the good old times."

"Ho! You're looking some distance ahead, aren't you?" grinned Joe.

"Come on. We'll go into town and purchase a good-sized can of white paint and a flat brush. We won't say a thing to the rest of the boys, lest the doctor should get on to us. We can hide the stuff in the bushes back of the gymnasium. It's bound to be bright moonlight again to-night. We can slip out of our room by way of the window after ten, sneak by the sentries, and do the trick. There'll be some pretty sore High School boys around Middlebrook to-morrow, I'm thinking."

Thus speaking, Bruce led the way down the road toward town.

Hardly had the two disappeared around the turn of the road before Al Smith appeared, leading a big mob of the academy boys.

A groan of dismay went up from them when Smith pointed out the big capital M so prominently displayed far up on the face of the ledge.

They gathered in little knots and canvassed the situation. Clearly, their High School rivals had got the bulge upon them.

The reflection was aggravating in the extreme. Well, what were they going to do about it?



## CHAPTER III.

## DARED DEATH FOR GLORY.

About that time a big delegation of High School boys came marching down the road from Middlebrook.

They were in a hilarious humor.

They had come to view the letter M, their own honored initial, and incidentally crow over any of the academyites they found within hail.

Naturally, there was lots doing around the neighborhood of the ledge within the next fifteen minutes.

Finally the indignant military students got their dander up and chased the High School bunch half way to Middlebrook.

Had the rival forces been more equalized a mix-up would have been the inevitable result.

Although the Highs had to retreat, nevertheless they carried with them the delightful consciousness that they were the people, all right.

The academy boys returned to the school and organized a big meeting to consider the question of getting square with the Highs.

Scouts were sent out to hunt up Bruce Hardy and Joe Ramsay, but those lads being in the village at that moment, could not be found.

Their absence was a serious drawback to the meeting, which was being held in the big gymnasium.

When the dinner-bell at noon broke up the gathering, nothing had been accomplished.

An unusual air of gloom hung over the refectory during the meal.

Hardy and Ramsay were still absent, and there was some conjecture as to where they had betaken themselves.

They appeared in time, however, to avoid losing their dinner altogether.

After the midday meal the school battalion assembled as usual, though it was Saturday holiday, for an hour's military exercises.

This routine, together with the morning inspection and the six o'clock dress parade, was never omitted from the opening to the close of the term.

When the battalion was dismissed all the boys, excepting the sentries, who were relieved every two hours, adjourned to the baseball grounds to take part in and witness a game between the regular nine and the scrubs.

The academy team had already played four games with the High School representatives this season, honors being even, and the final game was to come off on the following Saturday, the last day of the term.

After evening parade and supper the boys resumed discussion of ways and means of getting back at the Highs for playing a march on them with the letter M, but nothing came of it, and at nine o'clock taps were sounded, when all lights had to be put out and the students, with the exception of the night sentries, were presumed to be in bed.

The room occupied by Bruce Hardy and Joe Ramsay was as dark as the rest one minute after nine, but the two boys were not in bed, or even on the road there, by a long chalk.

They were posted in the shadow of the open window, carrying on a conversation in low tones.

The sky was clear as a bell and bright with stars, but the full moon had not yet made its appearance.

"You say Al Smith is sentry at the gymnasium for the next two hours?" said Bruce.

"Yes," answered Joe.

"Have you tipped them off?"

"Yes; it's all right. He'll be as blind as a bat when we give an owl's hoot."

"Good enough. We'll get out all right. We'll make a start about ten."

"The moon ought to be up by half an hour later. It's an ideal night for the job. It will be almost as light as day."

The two adventurous boys who had decided to engage upon the perilous undertaking of branding the face of Dead Man's Ledge with a double H above the High School's letter M, continued to talk on various subjects until the academy clock struck the hour of ten by a patent bell attachment which carried the sound to the four quarters of the grounds.

"Time," said Bruce, rising and stretching himself.

His chum followed suit.

They left their room like a couple of shadows in their stocking-feet, traversed the long hall and descended the stairs to the corridor of the classrooms below.

The key in the outer door was in the lock, but they made no attempt to take advantage of this circumstance.

They entered one of the classrooms overlooking the gymnasium building and noiselessly opened one of the windows.

Then the hoot of an owl floated mournfully out on the night air.

This was thrice repeated.

Then, after a pause, Bruce dropped out of the window to the ground outside, and he was quickly followed by his chum.

They crossed to the gymnasium, and, hugging the shadow cast by the building, moved confidently forward.

Turning the corner the sentry was nowhere to be seen.

"The coast is clear," said Bruce.

"Correct," replied Joe. "Al has marched around on the other side. We must cross to the bushes now, where we left the pot of paint and brush."

"Come on, then."

Noiseless as two Indians on the war-path the boys glided out into the open space beyond the gymnasium building and were presently within the shelter of the thick bushes a hundred yards away.

The can of paint and the brush had not been disturbed.

Bruce took one, Joe the other, and off they started for the ledge by a roundabout way.

The moon was rising about the distant treetops when they reached the foot of the towering rock.



Sitting down on the grass they removed their shoes.

"All ready?" asked Bruce.

"Yes," answered Joe, seizing the paint pot.

"Then follow me, and watch pretty close where you step. If you put your weight on a loose stone anywhere you're liable to get it in the neck, and then our expedition would end in failure."

"Never say die, old man. Don't worry about me, I'll take care of myself. Just look out for No. 1, and we'll get there all right."

So they started, Bruce, with the brush, leading the way. Like a couple of shadows they began the ascent of the ledge.

It was slow and cautious work after they had got above the first fifty-foot roosting place.

The moonshine made every crag and projection clear to them, but there were spots where there did not appear to be a solitary foothold, and they had to crawl back and forth along the dizzy height till they found holes and crevices to help them on their way upward.

But they stuck to their work like heroes, while the perspiration oozed down their heated cheeks.

"Now give me your hand, Joe," said Bruce at one particularly difficult place.

"Do you think you have purchase enough to pull me up?" asked his friend as he contemplated the feat before him.

"Sure I have, or I wouldn't take the chance," answered Hardy.

Joe, with implicit faith in his chum's judgment, extended his arm.

Bruce grasped his fingers in a vise-like grip.

"Now," he said, and his muscles stood out on his right arm as the weight of his friend tested their strength.

Joe dug his toes into the almost bare face of the rock and presently stood beside his chum on a narrow ledge 175 feet above the road.

With their faces to the rock, grasping the tenacious shrubbery around them and breathing heavily, they stood there five minutes and rested.

"I think those Highs must have discovered an easier route," grunted Joe. "This is far worse even than I thought it was. How in thunder are we ever going to get down?"

"We might roll down if it comes to the worst," snickered Bruce, who was as cool as a lump of ice.

"You've got more nerve than I have to joke like that up here."

"Are you sorry you came?"

"N-o!" replied Ramsay, with the slightest hesitation in his voice.

"I don't think we'll meet with anything worse than this," answered Bruce. "As to getting down, I've a stout line wound around my body, as you know, which may come in handy. Let's go on now."

And on they went, like a couple of monstrous flies, clinging desperately to every available bush or jagged stone, and

in this manner covered the next twenty-five feet and reached the narrow ledge on which the venturesome Highs had stood while they painted the letter M.

"Well, here we are as far as we can go," said Bruce.

The ledge was much wider than they had supposed, and Joe fetched a sigh of relief as he noted that fact, for the feat before them was a hard one.

The big black letter M was facing them, and they contemplated it for a minute or two.

Then they proceeded to business.

To paint a double H above the M the only possible way to do it was for Bruce, who was to do the job, to mount on his companion's shoulders.

Talk about cool nerve, well, that was an exhibition of it for fair.

Bruce unwound the line from his body and tied one end to the paint pot and the other end to the brush.

Then Joe braced himself and Bruce nimbly crawled up the face of the rock, boosted and supported by his chum.

Securing a foothold on Joe's broad shoulders, while Ramsay grasped his calves in regulation circus fashion, Bruce pulled up first the brush, then the pot, and commenced his work backward, Joe cautiously moving sideways at the word of command.

Hardy could only manage to paint the upper half of a five-foot letter in that position.

Having accomplished the work of marking out the top sections of two broad H's, Bruce cried:

"Now, Joe, I've got half of the job finished. Just squat down, will you, so I can complete the letters."

Joe squatted.

Bruce then worked ahead at a rapid rate, and after what seemed an age to Joe, finished the job.

"There, old man, what do you think of that for artistic work under difficulties?" Hardy asked his friend, after he had stepped back onto the ledge.

"It's the finest ever," replied Joe, regarding the initials with unbounded admiration. "You can make them out from across the river. They're not only higher, but bigger than the M. Yes, sir, they're all to the mustard."

"Are your shoulders sore?" asked Hardy.

"Not a bit."

"You were as steady as a stone wall, Joe. I knew you'd be, that's why I was willing to take the risk."

"I had to be. I knew your life depended on my stability. But I hope, Bruce, you won't ask me to do anything like that again. It's enough to take the starch out of any fellow."

"But not out of you, old chap," replied Bruce, patting him on the shoulder.

They rested for a good twenty minutes, and then leaving the paint pot and brush behind started to make their way down.

Fortunately, they found an easier way to extricate themselves than the route by which they had come, and reached the foot of the ledge in half an hour.



Resuming their shoes, they started for the academy, having, in the space of three hours, accomplished one of the nerviest feats for amateurs on record.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE REGISTERED LETTER.

Next morning it was whispered throughout the academy that a double H had been painted above the High School letter M, far up on Dead Man's Ledge.

The very idea that such a feat had been accomplished by one of their number set the boys wild with enthusiasm, though more than half of them doubted the truth of the report.

Such good luck didn't seem possible.

At any rate, just as soon as breakfast was over and morning inspection finished, a dozen groups started for the big rock to verify the statement.

The white double H in big outline was there, sure enough, and it entirely overshadowed the M.

The boys simply shouted themselves hoarse with glee.

Who had done it?

How had they managed to do it?

The heroes who had, at the peril of their lives, accomplished this glorious act, must not be allowed to remain unknown.

"I'll bet it was Bruce Hardy," exclaimed a boy, knowingly. "It's just like him. I don't believe there's another boy in the academy would dare attempt such a thing."

"Ay, ay!" chorused several, grasping at the suggestion, "it must have been Bruce."

At any rate, with one accord they cheered for Bruce Hardy on general principles.

Such undue excitement and noise on a Sunday morning naturally attracted the attention of the passers-by along the road.

Somebody asked the reason for it, and thus the news reached town, and by and by was heard by a High School scholar, who hastened to tell a friend, and then the two of them came out to the big rock to investigate.

Needless to say they found what gave them an awful shock—the large double H above their own beloved M.

As soon as the mob of academyites who had been to the ledge returned to the campus, search was instantly made for Bruce Hardy.

He and Joe were easily found, sunning themselves on the grounds.

"Are you guilty or are you not, Hardy?" asked the spokesman of the committee sent out to find him.

"Of what?" grinned the boy.

"Painting that double H on Dead Man's Ledge."

"Ask Joe here."

"Bruce did the deed all right," admitted Ramsay, en-

thusiastically, "and I had the honor of participating in the crime. Yes, boys, Bruce and I climbed the rock last night and, with the aid of the moonlight, wiped out the disgrace the Highs inflicted on us when they put their letter on record up there."

"Hurrah!" yelled the committee, and forthwith Bruce and Joe were surrounded, lifted upon willing shoulders, and marched back to where the bulk of the school had assembled.

The appearance of Hardy and Ramsay in such an elevated position was token enough for the school that the heroes of the double H had been discovered, and such a shout went up as caused Dr. Parkway to stick his bald head out of the window of his room to see what on earth was the matter on the campus.

A procession was immediately formed, and Bruce and his chum were carried around the entire limits of the grounds before they were released and cheered once more to the echo.

The news ere long reached the ears of the faculty, several of whom made it their business to go down to the ledge and view the fruit of the preceding night's work.

The peril of the undertaking, as well as the breach of academy discipline was so evident, that it was decided to call the principal's attention to the feats.

Bruce and Joe were summoned before Dr. Parkway.

"I understand that some time between sundown yesterday and daylight this morning you two boys accomplished the dangerous feat of ascending Dead Man's Ledge to a point some 200 feet above the level of the road, and while there painted the initials of your school on the rock. Have I been rightfully informed?"

"Yes, sir," answered Bruce, respectfully.

The doctor frowned.

"Please state the exact time when you left the academy for that purpose."

"At ten o'clock, sir."

"How did you manage to pass the sentries?"

"We managed it, sir."

"At what point did you leave the grounds?"

"I should like to be excused from answering that question."

"But I cannot excuse you. You both have committed a very serious breach of discipline by leaving your room after taps, and must expect to be severely punished for it. You could not have crossed the campus, or any part of the grounds, without detection, unless there was collusion, or gross lack of watchfulness on the part of one or more of the sentries. I therefore require you to answer my question."

"I will have to decline, sir, and accept the consequences."

The doctor pursed his lips, and repeated his question to Joe, who gave a similar reply.

"Very well, young gentlemen. Please report yourselves under arrest to the officer of the day."

They did so, and were escorted to the guard-house by the entire school, who gave three rousing cheers before they dispersed.



"I guess we're in for a court-martial, old man," remarked Joe, when the door had been locked upon them.

"The offense is serious enough to warrant it, according to the regulations," admitted Bruce.

"Rather tough for the last week of the term," said Ramsay.

"Discipline must be enforced; but I guess Dr. Parkway will find some way to let us off. We are about to graduate, you know. I'll bet we'll get off with a sharp reprimand."

That afternoon a petition was drawn up by a special committee selected for the purpose, stating the facts of the case—how the High School boys had blazoned their initial high up on Dead Man's Ledge, thereby boosting themselves into popular notice at the expense of the academy; and it was to wipe out that triumph of their rivals, as well as to go them a point better, that Bruce Hardy and Joe Ramsay had been guilty of a breach of discipline.

The petitioners expressed the hope that Dr. Parkway would take into consideration the fact that the prisoners had been solely actuated by a desire to sustain the honor of the academy, which naturally was a tender point with every student.

The petition was signed by every boy in the school, and was then presented to the principal by the committee.

While this was going on a belated mail was brought over to the academy from the postoffice, and among the letters was a registered one addressed to Bruce Hardy.

There was also a letter, postmarked Mackay, Idaho, for Joe.

Both were delivered at the guard-house.

Bruce tore his open, wondering what its contents could be that caused it to be registered.

A terrible shock awaited the boy.

Out into his hands dropped a letter, a check for \$400, and a folded document.

"Uncle Edward is getting liberal," remarked the boy, when he noticed the amount for which the check had been drawn. "I wonder what this is?" he added, unfolding the document.

It was a legally executed bill of sale for a mining claim out in Loon Creek, in the State of Idaho, made out in Bruce's father's name.

"Well, I never heard of that before. Why did Uncle Edward send it to me? His letter will explain it, I suppose," and letting the other papers lie in his lap Bruce was about to begin his letter when Joe burst out with:

"I say, old chap, this is great."

"What's great?" asked Bruce, looking at him.

"This letter. It's from my father. He's out in Idaho, investigating some new mining properties at a place called Loon Creek."

"Loon Creek!" exclaimed his chum, in a tone of great surprise.

"Yes. Funny name, isn't it? He wants me to come out there and spend my vacation with him. Says I must persuade you to go along for company. That it will be a change for us. I should think it would, and a welcome one

from my standpoint. What do you say? Will you come? Your uncle will let you go all right, for he never refuses you anything."

"I'd like to go," replied Bruce, with some enthusiasm. "I'll write to Mr. Harlow at once and ask him about it. I wouldn't be surprised if there is something in my letter about Loon Creek."

"What makes you think so?" asked Joe, in some surprise.

"Because my uncle, for some reason which I presume his letter will explain, sent me this bill of sale for a mining claim at Loon Creek, acquired by my father before he died," and Bruce tossed the document to his chum, and turned his attention once more to his letter, which ran as follows:

"New York, June 15, 190—

"My Dear Bruce—There was a crash on the Exchange to-day, and I was caught under the wheels of the stock juggernaut and financially crushed out of shape. ('Good gracious!' exclaimed Bruce to himself). I could stand the loss of my whole fortune with a fair degree of equanimity if that were the sum total of my misfortune to-day; but, alas! Bruce, there is worse, far worse, to tell. In the effort to stem the current of disaster I used money that did not belong to me—in other words, my dear wronged boy, I hypothecated the securities representing your entire property, and employed the cash in my mad effort to save myself; but in vain. I have been overwhelmed by the break of the market and am hopelessly ruined, and I have dragged you down with me in the wreck—that is the bitterest pill of all. I have irretrievably wronged you, B. Bruce, and in doing so have betrayed the trust reposed in me by your father, who was a good friend to me. I don't ask you to forgive me—I can never forgive myself. To ruin I have added disgrace, and it is fitting I should not live to face your merited reproaches. When this letter reaches you I will have passed away from this world. Think of me as you will, I only ask you to believe that until this fatal week I have tried to do by you as I would had you really been my own son. May heaven have mercy on my guilty soul.

"Your uncle,

"EDWARD HARLOW."

"P. S.—I enclose you a check for my entire balance at the bank—it is all I have to give you. Also a mining claim which once belonged to your father, and which, naturally, reverts to you. It may be worth something some day. I advise you to hold on to it, as I have noticed there have been recent discoveries of gold at Loon Creek."

To say that this terrible letter staggered Bruce would be putting the thing very mildly indeed.

It almost overwhelmed him.

He wasn't thinking of his property loss—he was thinking of the frightful inference of self-destruction on his uncle's part, conveyed in the letter.

"Why, what's the matter with you, Bruce?" cried Joe, in some alarm, noticing his white, set face. "Are you ill? I will call the guard," and he rose to do so.



"Don't" said Bruce, in a hollow voice, laying a detaining grasp on his arm. "I am not sick."

"Then, in heaven's name, what is the matter with you? Have you received bad news?"

"Yes," and the tears started into Hardy's eyes.

"I am sorry to hear it," replied his friend, sympathetically. "Has anything happened to your uncle?"

"Yes; he is financially ruined. But what is worse I fear——" with ashen lips.

"You fear what?"

"That he has killed himself!" cried the boy, with a groan.

## CHAPTER V.

### FROM NEW YORK TO LOON CREEK.

"This is a terrible thing," said Dr. Parkway, putting down Bruce's letter on his desk after reading it, and regarding the boy sympathetically.

Bruce had sent a request from the guard-house to the principal requesting a special interview, on a matter of vital importance, and it had been accorded him.

"Do you think, from the letter, that he really meant to kill himself?" asked the boy, anxiously.

The tone of the letter certainly impressed the doctor that way, but he didn't wish to confirm the idea in Bruce's mind, so he said, evasively:

"I wouldn't worry about it, Bruce, until we have some better evidence than that. Had he committed suicide, I think I should have noticed the fact in the paper."

The doctor forgot that he hadn't seen Saturday morning's New York papers.

Through some omission they hadn't been received at the academy.

At that moment a servant entered with a telegram for the principal.

He tore it open and read it with a corrugated brow.

"Bruce," he said, after a moment's hesitation, "I have received a message from Mrs. Robinson, your uncle's housekeeper, requesting me to send you home."

Bruce gave a gasp and turned white.

"Then something has occurred, sir. My uncle——"

"You have my heartfelt sympathy, my dear lad. It would not avail for me to withhold the truth now. Your uncle is dead."

Hardy gave a low cry of grief and clutched at the desk.

The tears welled into his eyes and streamed down his cheeks.

Then, stifling a sob, he pulled himself together.

"Under the circumstances, the charge against you is dismissed," said the doctor.

"But Joe Ramsay, sir——" began Bruce, thinking of his chum even in his grief.

"I shall order his immediate release from the guard-house. I presume you will want to take the seven o'clock train for Jersey City, Bruce. You will need some money, I suppose."

"No, sir. I have all that I require."

"I hope you will return after the funeral, so that you may be present at the commencement on Thursday to receive your graduating papers."

"I may, sir. But I shall not go to Princeton now. I must go into the world as I am and earn my living."

"It is very sad to think of. You are one of my brightest pupils, and I was looking forward to see you distinguish yourself at the university. Man proposes, but God disposes, my boy. We all must bow to the decrees of an All-wise Providence."

The funeral of Edward Harlow took place on Monday afternoon, and Bruce, with a sore heart, returned to Hurricane Hall Academy for the last time on Wednesday morning.

He had resolved to go West with Joe, not only because he was glad to accompany his chum into the great Northwest, but because it would give him an opportunity of looking into the mining claim, which was all he had left in the world of the property his father had left to him.

He had arranged for young Jack Egan to go with them, as now that Mr. Harlow's business was being wound up by his creditors, Jack was out of a situation.

Bruce and Joe graduated in a class of sixteen, and after the baseball game on Saturday, which was won by Bruce's superior twirling in the box for the academy team, the school broke up for the term, the students departing for their various homes.

Away up in the Northwest, hemmed in by mountains on every side, lies the little State of Idaho.

It stretches from Utah on the south to British Columbia on the north, from Montana on the east to Oregon and Washington on the west.

It has been said, and that truly, that within the borders of this State are hidden fortunes far greater than the world has ever produced.

While traveling by rail or stage, horseback or on foot—be it east, west, north or south—you find traces of the wealth which lies hidden in the mountains and hills.

Reader, we advise you to take a map of this empire and follow Bruce Hardy, Joe Ramsay and little Jack Egan by rail and stage, to a country new to you, yet old to the hardy placer miner of thirty years ago—to Loon Creek, a camp where many millions have been washed from its sands, and where to-day the glittering gold can be seen, just as of yore.

We will lead you into a country that is not hemmed in eight months of the year by snow-clad mountains, but into a region that is easy of access, and where, to-day, discoveries are being made that will astound the financial world, and stir up such a rush of prospectors as will cause the rushes of the past to fall into the background.



The boys left New York Wednesday morning by the 7.55 Chicago limited, and were soon speeding through Jersey City, Newark, New Brunswick, and then through Trenton, across the Delaware to Philadelphia.

A short stop, and then they went whirling along again to catch brief glimpses of Lancaster, Middletown and Harrisburgh, where another brief stop was made, and then on through Lewiston, Huntington, Tyrone, and up the mountains to Altoona, where they viewed (but for only a few minutes) the great shops of the Pennsylvania Railroad system.

Then the train curved around the famous Horseshoe Bend, by and by reached Cresson, the great health resort and summer pleasure grounds, and later descended and rushed through Johnstown, the Flood City.

Finally the train entered the Union Depot at Pittsburg, the greatest steel center in the world.

"Gee!" exclaimed Bruce, as they were looking westward over the city, "I don't see how the people exist here," and he pointed to the pall of smoke which hung above the roof tops.

"Excuse me, I'd rather labor somewhere else," replied Joe. "It wouldn't soot me for a cent," he added, with a snicker.

"That's pretty bright—for you," nodded Bruce, approvingly.

"I wouldn't remain bright for long if I tarried here," promptly answered the irrepressible Ramsay.

Then the train started on once more, flitting across the Allegheny River into the Sewickley valley, the home of Pittsburg's aristocracy; thence on to Beaver Falls, across the Ohio River, through Salem, Alliance, Massillon, and finally over the border into Indiana.

Fort Wayne was the next stop, and then, again, in a jiffy, the boys were headed for Chicago, the metropolis of the West.

After spending a few hours in the Windy City, our young travelers were wafted on their journey again, via the Burlington Route.

Across the State of Illinois they were carried at break-neck speed, and soon reached the Mississippi.

Thence through the town of Osceola, across the Missouri into Plattsmouth and Lincoln, then westward across the plains, finally reaching Denver.

After a day of sightseeing they boarded a train and were whisked southward over the world's scenic route—the Rio Grande.

On the Divide, at Palmer's Lake, they got their first sight of western mountain wonders.

On through canyon after canyon along the Arkansas River, higher and higher, through Leadville up to Tennessee Pass.

From this point they glided along the Eagle River, through rugged canyons, past towering mountain peaks, over madly rushing torrents, beautified by crystal water falls.

"Twig those little cabins up yonder!" ejaculated Joe, pointing to the miners' huts perched among the crags of

Red Cliff, which rose up thousands of feet above the train.

"I see them," replied Bruce. "How would you like to climb up that mountain?"

"Not on your life. Dead Man's Rock, near the dear old academy, was quite enough for me, thank you," replied Joe.

Down, down, down, into the Eagle River canyons they plunged on the way to Grand Junction, whence they speeded on to Salt Lake City.

After a change of motive power, and a run of 38 miles through the "Land of Milk and Honey," they were landed at Ogden, where they changed to the Oregon Short Line and traveled due north to Pocatello.

From Blackfoot they rode westward to Mackay, 85 miles away, where they expected to meet Joe's father.

At the Northern Hotel Joe found a letter awaiting him.

"The governor has gone on to Loon Creek," he said to Bruce, "and we are directed to follow by the Central Idaho stage."

"That suits me all right," replied his chum. "I can't reach Loon Creek any too soon."

"Do you know it would be great fun for the three of us to work that claim of yours, there seems to be a fierce lot of gold in sight in this State. Everybody hereabouts is talking about the prospects on Loon Creek. If it's one-half as fine as we hear, it isn't impossible but you may be able to pull enough dust out of your bit of property to recover your lost fortune," said Joe with some enthusiasm.

"I'm afraid that's too good to be realized—a kind of pipe dream."

"Oh, I don't know. Wait till we find father. He's an expert, you know. Maybe he can give you a wrinkle about your claim."

"Well, it's all I have in the world. If it's worth working I'm going to work it, unless I can sell it to advantage."

"If you mean to work it, then Jack and I are going to help you, aren't we, Jack?"

"Yep," replied young Egan, quite delighted at the idea of turning a real miner.

Next morning the three boys boarded the stage for a spin across the summit.

Finally they reached the Salmon River, and followed its banks to the junction of Yankee creek.

Away they went through the canyons at a lively rate, passing through the old placer workings of years ago, until they reached Custer, a typical mining town.

From Custer they embarked on a trip across the divide.

After passing the summit, another hour's ride brought them to their destination—Loon Creek.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A GLITTERING PROPOSITION.

The stage stopped at the express office, a wooden building adjoining the two-story frame edifice whose sign indicated



that it was the Oro Grande Hotel, and the boys dismounted from their elevated perches on the roof.

The town of Oro Grande, in the very midst of the Loon Creek district, consisted of one main street, not a paved one at that, merely a fairly level stretch of ground, perhaps half a mile from end to end, and bordered on either side with one or two story frame buildings, occupied by all sorts of business from a restaurant to a bank.

It was a new and interesting scene to the eyes of Bruce Hardy and his companions, fresh as they were from scenes of up-to-date civilization.

"This is a rough-and-ready place for fair," remarked Joe, taking the lead. "I'm anxious to meet the governor, and get something to eat."

"I wouldn't mind a Delmonico steak myself," grinned Bruce, following his chum. "How do you feel around the waistband, Jack?"

"I feel hungry. That restaurant sign over there looks good."

The three entered the hotel, registered, and then Joe asked if Major Ramsay, his father, was about.

"Major Ramsay was unexpectedly called away on a prospecting tour," said the clerk. "He started off this morning and expects to be gone a week maybe. Are you his son?"

"Yes."

"He left a letter for you," and the clerk handed it out. "He expected you boys, and made arrangements for your stay at this house. Here, Pete, show these young chaps to No. 16. When you've had a wash-up you can go in to supper. The dining-room is right back of the office here. You ought to be kind of hungry after your ride over from Custer."

"I should smile," replied Joe, pausing in the perusal of his father's brief note. "We can't get outside of your fodder any too quick."

The man Pete showed them up one flight to room 16, which was in the rear, and overlooked an unkept yard, and afforded them glimpses of straggling houses, and tents, and rugged ground in the distance, with abrupt elevations here and there.

"This is a peach of a hotel," spoke up Joe, looking out at the window.

"Well, it isn't quite as swell as the Waldorf-Astoria, in New York, I'm bound to admit," snickered Bruce. "Still it will do to keep the rain off."

"What do they charge here?" continued Jack, curiously.

"They charge enough, don't you worry," chipped in Joe. "You needn't let that affect your appetite, Jack, the governor is standing the damages—he can well afford it."

"This is a strange country," said Bruce, wiping his dripping face on a crash towel. "I wonder where my claim is situated?"

"We'll try and find out to-morrow, old man," answered Joe. "Then we'll meander out there and take a look around, We've got a whole week to put in before my dad will get back."

"S'pose we find some of these tough citizens have jumped my property?"

"In that case my father will make it pretty interesting for them. He knows the ropes, don't you fret. Spent half his life in diggings just like this. He made a small fortune years ago at Cripple Creek, and another in Goldfield, and he's interested in the development work of Thunder Mountain up here, where I guess he counts on making a round quarter of a million when things get humming."

"Well, your father understands how to get in on the ground floor, and then get out at the right time."

"There are no flies on the governor, bet your suspenders," grinned Joe. "Well, if you chaps are ready we'll move on to the provision counter. What say?"

"You needn't say it again, chum," answered Bruce breezily. "Jack and I are in quick marching order and ready for the fray."

"You mean the fry, don't you," chuckled Joe, leading the way out of the room.

"We leave the key at the desk, I s'pose," said Bruce after he had locked the door.

"Sure we do."

The boys didn't do a thing to the bill of fare when they lined up alongside of one of the tables in the dining-room, and they found the layout better than they had anticipated.

There were quite a number of other boarders present.

All of them naturally thought the three boys were new comers to Loon Creek.

One tall, dark-featured man, whose upper lip was adorned with a glossy black mustache, and whose equally black eyes snapped in a way that showed he wasn't an individual who let any chances get by him if he could help it, watched the boys with evident interest as he ate his supper at an adjacent table.

When he had finished he strolled out of the dining-room and hung about the foot-high veranda, picking his teeth with an ivory toothpick, a big diamond ring flashing upon his tapering little finger.

As soon as the boys made their appearance outside he came up to them and proceeded to introduce himself.

"I observed that you are strangers in Oro Grande," he began, with a smile which displayed a shining row of white teeth, as even and perfect as any ever exhibited in a dentist's showcase. "Permit me to make myself known to you. My name is Horace Bradshaw. I have an office down the street a way. If you'll step in that direction I'll show it to you. Whom have I the pleasure of addressing?"

He looked at Bruce, whom anybody would have taken for the leader of the party.

"This fellow has a great nerve, I must say," thought the boy, "but I suppose it is the custom of the country. At any rate one can't find fault with his politeness." Then aloud he replied to Mr. Bradshaw. "My name is Bruce Hardy."

"Happy to know you, Hardy," said Bradshaw, extending his scrupulously clean hand with the grace of a Chesterfield.

"This is my friend, Joe Ramsay," continued Bruce.



"Glad to meet you, Ramsay," and the dark featured gentleman shook Joe's hand.

"And this is Jack Egan—small but great."

Bradshaw bowed to Jack and twirled his mustache like an army officer.

"From the East, of course," said Bradshaw, half closing his eyes.

"Yes," replied Bruce.

"Well, you come to the right place if you want to make money, young men. This is the New Eldorado," he said, waving his arm so that it embraced half of the landscape. "There's untold millions here almost in sight. Thirty years ago thousands of men dug, panned and found riches here such as they had never dreamed of. Men fought for ten square feet of the richest placer grounds ever discovered. Veni, vidi, vici!—they came, they saw, they conquered!" cried the well dressed gentleman grandiloquently. "Then they left, as all good placer miners do. They didn't find it all, and they didn't look for the remainder. They left the mother lode."

The boys could not help being impressed by the enthusiastic picture presented by their new acquaintance.

"Now, if you've brought some money with you to make an investment," continued Bradshaw, who had been sizing up the well dressed lads with an eye to business, "you have been very fortunate in meeting with me before some of the sharks of Oro Grande succeeded in taking you into tow. Yes, young gentlemen, extremely fortunate," with the accent on the ex. "Before you are here a day all kinds of investments will be brought to your attention. Mining stock by the carload at from 1 to 5 cents a share will be dangled under your noses, and you will be promised dividends beside which the famous Monte Cristo will look like two cents. Pay no attention to such bait. They are frauds—rank deceptions. Now come right down to my office and I will show you something worth your while."

They went, and Mr. Bradshaw took them half a block down the thoroughfare until they reached an unpainted one-story shanty, over the door of which was nailed a sign which read: "Horace Bradshaw, Promoter of Leases."

"Step right in, gentlemen," said their conductor glibly.

Accordingly they stepped in, and found a small bare looking room, furnished with a plain desk and four chairs, the only adornment on the walls being two or three diagram maps.

"Make yourselves at home. You must excuse the absence of luxurious furnishings, but we have no use for such truck out in Loon Creek."

The boys appropriated three chairs while Mr. Bradshaw proceeded to light an oil lamp of a very ordinary pattern, for it was growing dusk outside.

Then Mr. Bradshaw sat down himself at his desk, and took a bunch of printed matter out of a drawer.

"Young gentlemen I want to call your attention to the leasing system. Do you know what it is?"

Bruce and Joe at once confessed their ignorance on the subject.

"Then I will explain," said Bradshaw, lighting a cigarette and blowing a cloud of smoke from his lips. "By the way, do you smoke?" and he offered a package of cigarettes to the boys. "No; it's just as well—it's a bad practice. As I was about to say, the leasing system is just this: When a big mine is proved, instead of putting men to work on it, the company awards leases, either on certain levels or on certain claims, and the lessees hire miners and put them to work digging for the ore that contains the precious metal. In most cases the parent company takes 25 per cent of the proceeds, and the 75 per cent goes to the lessees, who must also pay the expense of mining out their shares. But think what 75 per cent. means when \$20,000 is to be taken out every day!"

"It looks pretty good," admitted Bruce, in interested tones.

"I wouldn't mind owning such a lease," grinned Joe.

"Nothing easier," went on Mr. Bradshaw insinuatingly. "Let me give you an example: Not long ago a number of clerks in Ogden, Utah, formed what is known as the Ogden Leasing Company, and for every \$50 they invested they have received \$800."

"You don't say!" ejaculated Joe. "That's coining money."

"I should say it is. A great deal better than sitting behind a high desk figuring up the profits of somebody else who pays you only \$12 or \$15 a week for it. It's better, too, than laboring on for years without getting ahead. Or if you have money now, you are not quite human if you don't want more. I want it. If that were not so, I would not have brought you here to tell you of the opportunities I have made for myself since I came to Loon Creek. I would simply go right ahead and take out the gold and say nothing to anybody. But that requires money, and so I have organized a leasing corporation that will make money equally for all concerned in it. I have called it the Oro Grande Leasing Company, and I am going to take over leases on some of the best and biggest mines in Loon Creek. Nearly all the shares are sold. I may say they went like hotcakes. Now if you young gentlemen would like to go in on the ground floor with myself and the other fortunate ones, I can let you have a few shares for \$10 each, cash. The stock is non-assessable, and the shares are all common. Now is your chance—the opportunity of your lives," and the promoter flourished the documents before their eyes. "You must come in now or never. What do you say?"

"Well, if my governor don't object I'll take ten shares," said Joe, who was fascinated by the opportunity as presented.

"Good," said Mr. Bradshaw, with a smile of satisfaction. "And how many shares shall I reserve for you?" he asked, looking at Bruce.

"I don't think I'll take any," answered Bruce. "I own a claim in the district myself."

"And where might it be?" asked the promoter, regarding Bruce with fresh interest.



"I shall be better able to tell you when Major Ramsay returns to this town."

"Major Ramsay!" exclaimed Mr. Bradshaw, with a look of annoyance on his features. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"Yes. He is my friend's father," and Bruce laid his hand on Joe's shoulder.

"The dickens, you say!" cried Mr. Bradshaw, with something like an oath. "Young gentlemen, I think we'll adjourn this meeting to another occasion. I wish you a very good night."

He arose abruptly, turned out the lamp, led the way to the door, and left his visitors on the doorsteps without another word.

"What's struck him?" asked Joe, with a look of wonder.

"Ask me something easier," replied Bruce, as they turned to retrace their steps toward the hotel.

## CHAPTER VII.

### DIGGING FOR GOLD.

Bruce decided to consult with the proprietor of the hotel with reference to his mining claim.

He asked for an interview, which was readily granted, told him what he wanted to know, and showed him the bill of sale of the property.

"Why, this is the Golden Nugget claim," he exclaimed in great surprise, after he had examined the document. "It is registered here all right, and there has been no end of speculation, since the recent developments took place in this region, as to when the owner would turn up, either to start a company to work himself, or to put it on the market. The Lost Packer people have been after it, but could not connect. So your father owns this property, eh?"

"My father is dead. The claim belongs to me."

"Well," said the hotel man, drawing a long breath, "I wouldn't be surprised but you have a good thing in that claim, young man. It is situated down the canyon, just beyond the Lost Packer and not far from Thunder Mountain. Both of these properties promise rich results, and the same quartz ledge on which they rely at present may run through the Golden Nugget. Take my advice—don't make a move beyond looking your claim over till you have consulted with Major Ramsay. He is a thoroughly experienced man, and if the property is worth anything he'll fix you up all right."

"Thank you, sir," said Bruce, bidding him good night.

The next morning the proprietor of the Oro Grande gave Bruce exact directions for finding his claim, so after a good breakfast the three boys set out for the canyon.

They met an occasional prospector or miner on the road, but did not stop to speak to them.

A big white stone marked the lower limits of the Lost Packer claim and then they knew they were on the spot they sought.

The ground comprising the Golden Nugget was of an undulating character, with many full grown trees and plenty of bushes.

One of the many creeks, of the district ran through it near where its boundary line joined the Thunder Mountain property.

"Gee! It looks mighty lonesome out here, doesn't it, Joe?" said Bruce.

"That's what it does all right."

"We're all of five or six miles from town. Puts one in mind of the old placer diggings of early California that we have seen in pictures."

"It does that," coincided Joe.

"Is there gold in the ground all around here?" asked Jack Egan in wonder.

"I hope there is, that is gold quartz. Whatever surface gold was here has probably been panned out years ago when the district was overrun by the original prospectors. If there's any left it's along the creek here."

"I don't believe it was all found," said Joe. "I think while father is away we ought to put in our time digging around here and see what we can turn up. The exercise would suit me all right, and it ought to interest you, Bruce. As for Jack, he can do a little hustling as well as the next, can't you, Jack?"

"Sure I can. I'm ready to dig for gold any day. I call that fine fun."

"Don't be so cock sure of that, Jack. You'll find it mighty hard work turning up the dirt."

"He needn't do that," said Bruce. "As we only propose to do surface digging, we'll let Jack do the panning and washing, after we show him how."

"Why, do you know yourself?" asked Joe, with a quizzical smile.

"We can find out, can't we?"

"I guess we can. When do we start in? To-morrow morning?"

"I see you want to do the rush act."

"Sure. Why not? You oughtn't to kick. Whatever is found belongs to you."

"Nonsense! We'll divide up, as the labor will be equalized."

"No," said Joe, shaking his head. "I've got a better idea."

"What is it?"

"We'll organize the Golden Nugget Leasing Company," grinned Joe. "You take 25 per cent. of the gross results and the 75 per cent. remaining we'll divide evenly. How's that?"

"I see you have been taking lessons from Mr. Bradshaw."

"Why not? His idea isn't patented. Come now; do we form the company?"

"Just as you say," smiled Bruce, thinking the matter quite a joke.

"What do you say, Jack?" said Joe.



"Count me in if it doesn't cost anything," grinned Jack. "You know I'm strapped."

"There's no initiation fee," laughed Joe. "We're going to put up our labor against three-quarters of what we are lucky enough to pull out. That's settled, then, so three cheers for the Golden Nugget Leasing Company."

"Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!" cried the boys unanimously, with a final "Tiger" from Jack Egan as he turned a hand-spring expressive of delight at the prospect before them.

They tramped over the claim till they got tired, and then started back to Oro Grande.

"Of course we'll have to confine our efforts to the vicinity of the creek," said Bruce. "It seems to me it would be only a waste of time to dig elsewhere."

"I guess you're about right," agreed Joe. "The creek it is, then."

"We must provide ourselves with a regular outfit. I guess we can find such things in plenty on Main street."

"We'll get the laugh, I'm afraid, as there doesn't seem to be any surface mining going on around here now."

"Well, I'll tell you what we'll do. Buy our outfits, including a tent and some blankets, hire a team and drive out here. We can bring enough provisions for a week. We'll just camp out here by ourselves. It will be no end of fun," cried Joe, eagerly.

"Hurrah!" shouted Jack, trying to stand on his head, but making a dismal failure of it.

"I'm agreeable," replied Bruce, who rather liked the idea.

So the matter was settled, and after they had had dinner at the hotel, Bruce informed the proprietor as to their plans.

He ridiculed the idea, and said they would get tired in less than twenty-four hours.

"Don't you believe that, sir; we're not built that way," replied Bruce.

"And you really expect to find gold on the surface of your claim," smiled the hotel man.

"If it's there we're going to find it."

The man shook his head after a conclusive fashion.

"You won't find enough to pay you for the trouble. However, there won't be any harm done if you try, just for the fun of the thing. It will be exercise for you boys. I'll expect to see you back here in a day or two."

"If you do I'll give you leave to charge us double board for the time we've been away," laughed Bruce.

That afternoon they made their purchases at a store recommended by the hotel man, who had been a placer miner himself in the good old days as he called them.

"At any rate, you boys have got the right kind of pluck, and if this was a placer camp I'd back you to come out as well as the next. But it isn't, so you'll only have your labor for your pains," he remarked.

Then he gave the boys full instructions how to pan out the dirt.

"Whatever gold ~~dust~~ you may happen to find will drop to the bottom when you stir the dirt up. I'm afraid the re-

sults will be so small you'll be apt to overlook them," he said.

"We've got sharp eyes," said Bruce; "there's nothing worth while going to get by us."

"Well, I wish you good luck. I stand ready to buy your findings at current rates, then I'll frame them and hang them over the bar as a curiosity."

The boys were up bright and early next morning and were the first at the breakfast table.

Bruce had discarded his ordinary clothes, and appeared in a rough pair of trousers, woolen shirt, soft hat and boots.

He had also provided himself with a first-class rifle and ammunition, as a protection against any rough characters who might seek to annoy them, as well as for shooting certain small game which was plentiful beyond the town limits.

Bidding the hotel man a temporary good-by they started off down the road toward the canyon in a shaky kind of cart, drawn by a mule, which they had hired for the trip.

As soon as they reached the Golden Nugget claim they staked the mule out in an open space, unloaded their implements and utensils, and set their tent up on a clear spot overlooking the creek, where they could keep an eye on it occasionally while at work.

The wagon was pushed out of sight among the trees.

Then, with the eagerness characteristic of boys, they took their shovels, and pick, and pans, went down near the level of the creek, and started in to dig for gold.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A GOLDEN NUGGET.

The bed of the creek had changed its course in recent years, and it was along the line of its former course that Bruce and Joe began their mining operations.

Jack proved to be slow at the washing process, so that Bruce stopped digging and went over to give him further instructions.

At last quite a number of shining yellow particles began to show through the loose dirt still remaining at the bottom of the pan.

"We seem to have struck the metal at the start off!" exclaimed Bruce excitedly. "Come here, Joe."

Joe went over.

"If that isn't gold what do you call it?" asked his chum eagerly.

"It's gold, as sure as you live," declared Joe in great delight.

"And Landlord Stetson was sure we wouldn't find any worth speaking of."

"He's one of those fellows who thinks he knows it all.



"I'd give something if he was here now to take a look into this pan," said Joe. "Well, if we turn up all those sparklers at the first panful of dirt, how much ought we to wash out in the course of a day?"

"I haven't the time to figure the matter out, Joe."

Most of the stuff was pure gold, but there were two or three very small pieces of quartz in which they could see the yellow metal imbedded.

Jack picked out the valuable particles and dropped them into a small bag they had brought for the purpose, while Bruce and Joe returned to their digging with fresh zeal.

As pan after pan turned up many golden specks the boys grew more and more excited over the prospect.

"It's evident the water of the creek has brought a good bit of gold from somewhere and left it behind in the ooze when its course was altered."

"Looks that way," admitted Joe.

"At that rate we ought to find it all along here."

"That seems reasonable."

"I think we shall have the laugh on Mr. Stetson, instead of he on us."

"We'll make him feel like two cents," laughed Joe.

"He said he'd frame whatever gold we found and hang it up in his barroom as a curiosity."

"He's a funny man, isn't he?"

"It isn't that. He honestly believes we won't find enough to make a showing," said Bruce.

"Well, we'll let a little light in on his gray matter before we're many days older. Hello! What's the matter with Jack now. He's coming this way on the hop, skip and jump. What's troubling you now, Jack? Have you found so much gold you're after a shovel to scoop it out?" grinned Joe.

Jack's answer was to hold up his hand.

"Look at that," he cried.

They looked.

Jack had found a lump of pure gold as large as a small marble in the last pan of dirt he was washing.

"Gee whiz! It's coming our way for fair," exclaimed Ramsay. "Who says there isn't any surface gold around here?"

"Lots of people say so, but it's evident they don't know about the possibilities of the Golden Nugget claim," said Bruce. "That's our first nugget."

"May there be many more like it," put in Joe, regarding the find with glistening eyes. "The G. N. Leasing Company is doing a rushing business."

They worked steadily on till their stomachs gave notice that dinner time was at hand.

Whereupon they reluctantly knocked off and sat down under the shade of the trees to eat half a dozen prepared sandwiches, a whole apple pie, and drink the contents of a bottle of milk.

The bag containing the fruits of their morning's work was passed around and examined with satisfaction.

"How much do you think it is worth?" asked Joe.

"I should say there must be \$15 worth there if there is a cent."

"That would give you \$7.50 and Jack and I \$3.50 apiece. That isn't so bad."

"If we do as well as this every day——"

"We'll soon be bloated capitalists," grinned Joe.

They didn't do near as well during the afternoon, though they worked longer and harder.

"Well, I suppose we can't expect to get the earth all at once," was Joe's comment as he examined their pile again while Bruce was getting supper over their camp-fire. "This bag doesn't seem to have got much heavier since dinner time. Sure you didn't lose any, Jack?" he asked Egan with a sly wink.

"Not on your life," replied Jack.

"See that you don't, young fellow."

Before they turned in for the night they dug a hole in the ground inside the tent and buried the bag containing their findings.

Soon after they got to work next morning they had a visitor.

He was a typical miner, unshaven, with a dirty woolen shirt open at the throat, and his soiled trousers were stuck into his boots.

He hung around watching what the boys were doing with some interest.

"I wish he would move on," muttered Joe at length, giving his spade a vicious dig into the ground.

"So do I," agreed Bruce. "But we can't make him."

At that point the stranger chipped in.

"Say, who gave you chaps permission to work this claim?"

"What do you want to know for?" asked Joe, shortly.

"That's my business."

"Well, we're not telling all we know."

"You haven't got no right here."

"How do you know that?" spoke up Bruce.

"I know it."

"You're off your perch," put in Joe. "We represent the Golden Nugget Leasing Company. We're working the surface dirt on shares with the owner's permission."

"I suppose you expect me to believe that?" asked the visitor sarcastically.

"I don't care whether you believe it or not," answered Joe, "it's the fact just the same."

"Who is the owner of this claim?"

"If you're interested in the matter real bad, a letter addressed to Mr. Hardy, care of the Oro Grande Hotel, will reach him. I hope you're satisfied now."

"I guess you boys are givin' me taffy," growled the unwelcome visitor.

"If you think we ain't all right, you had better ask Mr. Stetson, of the Oro Grande Hotel. However, your opinion, one way or another, doesn't cut any ice with us."

The visitor flashed a look of anger at Joe and began to



watch Jack pick a number of yellow particles out of the bottom of the pan.

"Say," said the man at length, approaching Bruce, "do you want to let me in on this? I'll help you dig, and I won't say a word about what we find."

"No," replied Bruce, firmly but politely, "we don't want another partner."

"Oh, you don't, eh?" snarled the stranger aggressively. "Then you're goin' to regret it."

"We'll take our chances at that. Since you talk that way I guess you might as well move on," said Bruce, looking him squarely in the eyes.

The fellow uttered a suppressed oath, turned on his heel and disappeared among the trees.

"That chap looks as if he was one of the toughs of the district," remarked Joe, after he had watched to see that their visitor didn't go near their tent.

"It is possible he may try and make trouble for us," said Bruce, reflectively.

"What can he do?" asked Joe. "You own this claim, and you've the papers to prove it. He's a bum, that's what he is."

"We are likely to have other visitors now."

"Well, we'll have to grin and bear it. We can't build a high wall around the creek to hold interlopers at a distance."

They added considerably to their bag of gold that day, and were not bothered by any more strangers.

The third day of their gold seeking opened as usual bright and sunny, and the boys were up at five and at work by six.

Bruce and Joe had acquired blisters on their hands from being unaccustomed to a continuous handling of the shovel and pick.

Jack found his part of the business rather monotonous, but as there always were at least a few golden specks at the bottom of each panful of dirt that he washed, his enthusiasm was sufficiently sustained to prevent him from losing interest in the proceedings.

Thus matters went on until about eleven o'clock when Bruce struck the pick into a fresh spot and unearthed what at first he thought was a stone, but which, on examination, proved to be a solid nugget of gold.

He had struck what is known as a pocket in placer digging parlance—a spot where fine particles of gold, brought down by the stream for years and years, had gradually collected and formed themselves into a concrete mass.

A pocket was what the old-time miner was always on the lookout after, for it yielded results at one swoop not to be obtained otherwise by weeks of washing. The value of Bruce's find was about \$500.

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed Joe, in great enthusiasm, "look at the size of it! Who would have supposed we should strike such luck at this time?"

The three gathered around after the lump of virgin gold had been thoroughly cleansed in the stream and regarded its dull, yellow surface with great interest.

## CHAPTER IX.

### STRIKING A VEIN OF RICH QUARTZ.

While they were thus employed there was a fresh arrival on the scene whose approach they did not observe until he was right on them.

It was Mr. Horace Bradshaw, as clean and well groomed as ever, and his snappy black eyes took in the golden nugget with some surprise.

His well polished shoes showed he had ridden over from town, though his horse was not in sight.

Whether he knew the boys were there and intended taking them unawares, or his appearance was a matter of pure accident, could not be determined except by himself.

"You seem to have struck luck, boys," he remarked in his cold, impassive tones, as he twirled his long mustache with one hand.

The boys were astonished and somewhat disturbed by his unexpected appearance.

"Yes," replied Bruce laconically.

"Come out to see us about that leasing company of yours?" grinned Joe, for want of something else to say.

"No," replied the promoter, with a sharp glance at the boy. "I was just taking a look around the country, and happening to spy you chaps I stepped down here to see what you were doing."

Bruce and Joe both wondered if the man was telling the truth.

"Well, you see what we're doing," said Joe, scratching his chin.

"Have you authority for taking gold out of this claim?" asked Bradshaw deliberately.

"The very best," answered Bruce, dropping the nugget into his trousers pocket.

His answer was so straightforward that its import was lost on the visitor.

"You know the owner of the Golden Nugget, then?"

"Intimately."

"A relative, perhaps?" asked the promoter, fixing the boy with his black eyes.

"Perhaps," replied Bruce.

"Do you mind mentioning his name?"

"His name is Hardy."

"Hum! That is your name, I believe?"

"It is."

"Are you the owner?" short and sharp.

"I am," answered Bruce, equally as direct.

"You have papers to show your rights, I suppose?"

"I have."

"Do you want to sell the claim?"

"I haven't thought about the matter."

"Maybe I can arrange with you to lease the property, after you have demonstrated your right to enter into such an agreement?"



"You're too late," chirped Joe, with a grin. "It is already leased to the Golden Nugget Leasing Company."

"Indeed," said Mr. Bradshaw calmly. "I haven't heard of such a company. Who are its representatives?"

"We three."

The promoter smiled unpleasantly.

"That is a joke, I presume."

"No, sir. It's a fact."

"I'd like to speak with you a moment," said the visitor, turning to Bruce.

"I will listen to you, sir."

"Come a little distance away, if you please."

"I have no secrets from my partners, here," replied Bruce stoutly.

Mr. Bradshaw smiled again.

Joe afterward said that if a snake could grin it must be like Bradshaw's.

"I would prefer not to say what I have to say before them," said the promoter.

Bruce hesitated and then retired with Mr. Bradshaw a short distance away.

The conversation between the two was short, Bruce evidently not falling in with his visitor's views.

"He wanted to see me at his office to talk the matter of selling or leasing this claim over," said Bruce, when he rejoined his companions. "But I frankly told him I wasn't going to make any arrangements with any one until I had consulted with your father," to Joe. "He tried to persuade me to the contrary, but I wouldn't have it, so I guess he's gone off mad."

Bruce took the nugget from his pocket and dropped it into the bag.

"Now, look out for that, Jack."

"You bet I will," replied the boy, drawing the mouth of the bag tight and putting it into his pocket.

The boys then continued their work.

Bruce presently unearthed several smaller nuggets from the same pocket, and soon after struck a ledge that proved to be gold quartz.

"I guess we've struck it by the wholesale," cried Joe, now greatly excited.

"These specimens certainly seem to be quite rich in ore, if I am any judge," said Bruce, equally moved by the find.

"I shouldn't wonder but that vein runs straight ahead. This is what they call outcropping, I suppose," said Joe eagerly. "If you haven't a good thing in this claim they may call me a liar. Looks as if there was a fortune, or several of them, here. I wish the governor was back, I do indeed. This property might, when properly worked by experienced people, come up to the Florence at Goldfield, which has for some time been turning out ore valued at \$15,000 daily. That would be a pretty decent annual income, saying nothing of having it every day."

"Well," said Bruce, "let's get a move on and see how far this vein really does go."

"Bet you a pair of silk suspenders we don't reach the end of it."

"I'll present you with the best in the market if we don't."

"Then I consider them as good as mine. You can afford to have real gold buckles put on those suspenders, chappie, and don't you forget it."

"Jack can take a rest from washing now," said Bruce. "Send him up to the wagon there for two gunny sacks. As soon as we fill them with quartz we'd better be thinking of taking the stuff back to town. We can come here again you know and dig out more."

Jack ran and got the bags, and as fast as Bruce's pick broke up the ledge, he shoveled the chunks of quartz into the bag Jack held open within reach.

Before twelve o'clock they had filled both of the bags as full as they could safely handle.

Then they desisted for a well-earned rest.

"I think a rabbit stew would go pretty well, don't you?" said Joe, licking his lips at his own suggestion.

"Take the gun and hunt up a rabbit, then," said Bruce.

"Thanks, but it might take me an hour to find one."

"You mean to hit one," grinned Bruce. "You ought to be able to find one easy enough."

"Oh, go bag your head. I'm not such a rank shot as all that. If I saw one I could bring it down at the first try."

"You tell it well. I'll wager Jack here can shoot all around you."

"Sure I can," chirruped Jack, with a broad smile.

"What's the matter with you going rabbit hunting yourself, you're so plaguey smart," said Joe. "Maybe you think you could bag one in five minutes or so."

"No, I don't think I would be able to produce one under half an hour, and I am too tired and hungry to try at present. Come, now, light a fire, like a good fellow."

"Jack, light a fire, will you?" said Joe, lazily, passing the order on to Egan.

"Who was your waiter last year, Joe Ramsay?" retorted Jack, laughingly.

"Oh, come now; no squabbling," interjected Bruce. "You light the fire and get some sort of dinner ready and I'll go out by and by and bag a few rabbits to take back with us to the hotel."

"Well, if I must, I must," complained Joe, sitting up. "Come along, Jack, and give me a lift."

Between them they started a fire and Joe prepared a pot of coffee.

Then he inserted several potatoes to bake in the hot embers.

Jack was set to watch and turn them, while Joe got the plates, and cups, and the last of the cold meat they had brought with them.

"Say, are you going to anchor there all day?" called Joe to his chum. "Dinner is waiting for you."

Bruce, who was reclining under the shade of a big tree not far from the creek, got up and stalked over to where his companions were squatted on the grass.

"Before I go rabbit hunting," said Bruce, after dinner was over, "we'd better get these two bags of gold quartz up here."



"All right," agreed Joe. "Here, Jack, you fetch the pick and shovel."

"This is a good lift," said Bruce, as he raised one of the bags and started up the incline toward the trees.

"Right you are," replied Jack, hefting the other, and then with a grimace raising it to his shoulder and marching after his chum. "There," he said, casting it down beside the other. "I wouldn't mind owning a hundred tons of that. I think I could afford to go to Europe and buy a castle or two on the Rhine or elsewhere."

"Well, I'm off," said Bruce, shouldering his rifle. "Don't go to sleep and let somebody steal those two bags of quartz."

"Don't you worry; Jack and I are going to play a game of mumble-the-peg till you get back."

Bruce laughed and disappeared among the bushes.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE HOLD-UP.

"Hold on, Jack," cried Joe an hour later, as they sat on the turf and played the little boys' game of mumble-the-peg, "don't be so previous. That isn't a miss."

"Sure it's a miss," asserted Jack stoutly. "You can't get your little finger under the handle."

"Who says I can't?" demanded Joe with a grin.

"I say so. You can't bluff me, Joe Ramsay."

"Well, you just watch me, will you?" said Joe, pushing Jack's outstretched hand away, and proceeding to illustrate how he could insert his little finger under the handle of his knife which lay nearly flat with the ground.

"Here, hold on there," remonstrated Jack. "That isn't fair."

"What isn't fair?"

"What you're doing. You're pushing your finger into the ground."

"You'd better get a pair of spectacles, Jack," snickered Joe.

"I can see as well as you can. I won't stand for that. It's my turn. I told you I'd beat you, smart Aleck."

"All right. Have your own way. I'm going to get a drink of water down at the creek."

"I don't think you will, young fellow. You're going to stay right where you are," cried a rough voice behind them.

Both boys looked up startled to find a couple of roughly dressed fellows close behind covering them with a pair of six-shooters.

They recognized the foremost, the fellow who had spoken, as their tough visitor of the day previous.

"What do you want?" asked Joe, recovering from his momentary panic at the sight of the revolver aimed at his head. "What do you mean by pointing that shooting-iron at me anyway?"

"One question at a time, young fellow," growled the rascal mockingly. "You'll see in a few minutes what we want and what we're going to get. Stand up, or I'll fill you full of lead."

Under the circumstances Joe felt he had to obey, though it went much against his grain to yield.

"Here, Hughes," ordered the leading ruffian, who seemed to be bossing the job. "Tie this chap to that tree."

The man Hughes, who looked every whit as big a scoundrel as his companion, produced a piece of stout rope and pulling Joe's arms behind and around the trunk of the tree, tied them securely.

Then he passed the balance of the rope around the boy's body, and tied him tight.

"Now truss up the kid to the next tree," said the other, watching the proceedings with grim satisfaction.

Hughes followed directions to the letter.

"Now, then," said the man addressed as Hogan, to Joe, "where's your pal?"

"I'll never tell you," answered the boy, resentfully.

"Won't you?" snarled Hogan, yanking out his revolver again and pushing it into Joe's face. "Do you want me to blow the whole top of your head off?"

"I don't know where he is," replied the boy doggedly.

"You don't?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, where did he go?"

"Hunting rabbits."

"How long has he been gone?" and Hogan jabbed his gun against the boy's temple menacingly.

"Bout an hour."

"Where's that gold dust you fellows have washed out?"

"I haven't got it."

"Well, you know where it is."

"Mebbe it's in one of them bags," suggested Hughes, making a move in their direction.

"Look and see if it is."

"That's what I'm a-doin'."

Hughes cut the string which secured the mouth of the first bag with an ugly-looking bowie-knife.

He took out a sample of the contents.

"It's gold quartz," he said, "and richer'n thunder."

"The deuce you say!" exclaimed Hogan eagerly.

He went over and took a look at the stuff.

"Is it all like this?" he asked.

"Can't tell unless we dump it out," replied Hughes.

"Shake it up and try another sample."

Hughes shook the bag up and took out another specimen which proved to be fully as satisfactory as the first.

"That'll do, Hughes. Tie it up. It's good enough for us. There's just two bags of it—one a-piece to carry."

"How about the gold dust we came after?" asked Hughes.

"I'll search the boy."

He did so but found no trace of what he was after.

They didn't seem to think it worth while to search Jack Egan—he was only a kid in knickerbockers.



Yet in Jack's pocket at that time was the \$500 nugget and a few ounces of what is called gold dust.

The boys had forgotten to add it to the previous results in the bag buried in the ground on which their tent stood.

The two men, leaving the bags of quartz where they had found them, went over to the cart under the trees and hunted every nook and corner of it, of course unsuccessfully.

Then they went through the tent without avail.

Such a barren result produced a good bit of swearing on their part.

After making a general examination of the locality they returned to the open space where they had left the boys bound.

They consulted together, Hogan seemingly disposed to make another threatening move on Jack Ramsay, while Hughes, more prudent, advised that they get away at once with the quartz.

Hughes finally prevailed.

The scoundrels, having secured the result of the boys' morning's work, were about to beat a retreat when Bruce Hardy, rifle in hand, suddenly appeared on the scene.

He took the situation in at a glance and prepared for action.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE SWING OF THE PENDULUM.

"What are you doing with those bags, you scoundrels?" cried Bruce, raising his rifle.

Hogan with a curse dropped his bag and reached for the pick used by the boys which lay on the ground near him.

Hughes's hand went to his belt for his revolver.

Bruce detected the movement and instantly covered him with the muzzle of his gun.

"Drop that bag and throw up your hands, and you, too, Mister Man," addressing Hogan in turn, "or this gun of mine may go off, and I won't be responsible for the consequences."

The rascals, outmaneuvered, sullenly obeyed.

"Now march over to those trees," commanded Bruce, advancing.

Keeping a wary eye on the two ruffians, Bruce went to Jack, and whipping out his jack-knife, speedily released him.

"Now, Jack," he said, handing the boy the knife, "cut Joe loose."

"You're all to the good, Bruce," said Joe, as he shook himself clear of the tree. "What's sauce for the goose ought to be sauce for the gander. We ought to tie these thieves up to the tree and let them have a taste of their own medicine."

"Well, I'll keep them covered while you do it," said Bruce.

Joe picked up the rope, and with a grin of satisfaction proceeded to carry out his own idea of exact justice.

Hogan and his pard, Hughes, scowled menacingly at him as he advanced.

"Pooh!" said Joe, "I don't care a rap for your frowns. The tables are turned on you, so you've got to grin and bear it. We're not such fools as to let you go after the way you've acted."

"I'll cut your heart out one of these days," snarled Hogan.

"I don't think you will," replied Joe coolly. "At any rate I'm taking all the chances. I'll relieve you of your gun as a little bit of precaution. If you want it again, you can inquire for it at the Oro Grande Hotel."

Joe took possession of Hogan's revolver, and then tied the man to one of the trees.

Then he took Hughes's shooter away and secured him to another tree.

"If I had a camera here I'd take a snap-shot at you two," he snickered. "You'd make a beautiful picture. It's a wonder you wouldn't get a shave once in a while. You need it."

"We won't do a thing to you if we ever get our hands on you," scowled Hogan.

"You mean you didn't do a thing to the two of us a while ago; but you're getting it back now with interest. Where did you expect to carry that quartz to?"

"None of your pesky business," snarled Hogan.

"Come here, Joe," said Bruce. "Help me get the wagon out from under the trees. Jack, run back yonder and fetch those rabbits I shot. You'll find them near the bushes yonder."

While Ben and Joe were moving the wagon into the open, and loading the two bags of quartz into it, Jack went for the dead rabbits and brought them up.

"Now lead the mule up," said Bruce.

Joe obeyed, and they harnessed the animal to the shafts.

Then they took down the tent and put all their things into the wagon.

"Are you goin' to leave us tied up here?" demanded Hogan, when he saw that the boys were about to depart.

"Didn't you intend to leave the kid and I tied here?" answered Joe.

"We knew your pal was coming back. He'd release you."

"Thanks for nothing. If you'd got the bulge on all three of us, it would have been the same thing. You'd have left us tied to the trees to get loose if we could, or starve if nobody happened to come to our rescue, which wasn't likely seeing to-morrow is Sunday."

"We hain't had nothing to eat since morning," whined Hughes.

"Well, here's part of a loaf for you. That must do you till we send somebody after you to take you to the town jail, if there is such a place in Oro Grande," said Bruce, pulling out three-quarters of a loaf of bread, breaking it in half, and handing half to each of the rascals after releasing one of their hands.



Everything being in readiness for their departure, Bruce took the reins and started the mule for the canyon.

They hadn't been gone more than a quarter of an hour before two men galloped up to the neighborhood, dismounted a short distance away, tied their horses to trees, then advanced with some caution.

One of these men was Mr. Horace Bradshaw.

The other was Buck Bromley, his partner in a big gambling establishment which formed an attractive feature of social Oro Grande.

Hogan and Hughes heard the newcomers advancing through the trees behind.

They held their peace, however, until Bradshaw and his companion came out into the open.

The four men recognized one another at once.

Bradshaw and Bromley were not only astonished to find Hogan and Hughes at that spot, but more so to see them bound, helpless prisoners, to trees.

"Hello!" exclaimed Bradshaw, "what happened to you chaps?"

"Cut us loose, will you?" begged Hogan and his pal in a breath.

"Of course," replied the promoter and gambler, taking out a jack-knife and severing their bonds. "What's the trouble."

"Trouble enough," growled Hughes with an oath.

"Well, let us hear how you came to be tied to those trees."

Hogan told their story and cursed the authors of their predicament roundly.

"Then they've gone back to town," said Bradshaw with some disappointment.

"That's what they have," replied Hogan, with a few more choice expletives.

"That settles the business for the present," said the promoter to his associate, Bromley.

"What, were you after them, too?" asked Hogan.

"We expected to do a little business with them," replied Bradshaw impassively.

"What kind of business?" inquired Hogan curiously.

"Look here, Hogan, you're too inquisitive," interjected Bromley with a frown. "If you chaps will take our advice you'll make yourselves scarce if you don't want to go to jail, for just as soon as the boys reach town they'll set the sheriff on to you for attempted robbery."

Evidently Hogan and Hughes thought so, too, for they looked at each other nervously.

"I hate to let a couple of kids like them get the best of us," growled Hogan. "If it hadn't been for the fellow, who was away at the time we nabbed the other two, coming up with his rifle and getting the drop on us we'd have made a good haul of rich quartz. I never see such hard luck."

"They took our guns away from us, too," complained Hughes.

"It looks funny to me that a pair of seasoned vets like you, and both of you heeled, couldn't get away with three boys, one of them a mere kid at that," said Bradshaw with a sneer.

"Didn't I tell you the biggest one held us under the muzzle of his rifle?" snarled Hogan.

"What were you dreaming about that you let him get the drop on both of you?"

"He got it all right, when we wasn't expectin' anybody to show up. We thought we had the business dead to rights."

"That's just it. You fellows were too cocksure and got taken down a peg or two. Well, I don't see as there's anything for you to do but light out as Bromley suggested. The father of one of those boys is Major Ramsay, who's off prospecting just now. As soon as he gets back he'll waste no time in making the place too hot to hold you, mark my words," said Bradshaw significantly.

"We can't do no migratin' the way we're fixed—half starved and without any guns," grumbled Hogan. "It's a long way from here to the next town, and it would be a case of hoofin' it, seein' we hain't got no hosses. No; Hughes and me will make a bee-line for Parsons' ranch. He's a pard that'll help us out."

With these words Hogan and his companion started for the canyon road, while the two gamblers returned to where they had left their horses, mounted them and rode back toward Oro Grande.

It was getting dark when the two ruffians, after a tramp of six miles, approached the neighborhood of the ranch they had set out to reach.

Parsons's lay back among the hills about a mile from a road, which connected at a certain point with the road leading to Oro Grande.

"Hello!" exclaimed Hogan, suddenly, "there's a wagon yonder in the hollow."

"Looks as if it had broken down," replied Hughes.

"That's just what it has. Say, if it ain't them pesky boys!" he cried, grabbing his companion by the arm.

"So 'tis. What they doin' 'round here—four miles from the Oro Grande road?"

"It doesn't take much guessin' to see they've mistook their way—they chaps are strangers in the district."

"That's it," answered Hughes, with a chuckle. "They turned up this way at the Little Effie crossin' 'stead of keepin' to the main road."

"That's what they've done, and their old shack has slipped into a gully and busted a wheel."

"Let's get down behind them trees and watch 'em. They've got them bags of quartz down there, and it ain't more'n a mile from here to Parsons's. Pard, we ought to be able to recover that stuff," said Hughes, with a grin of anticipation.

"The only thing ag'in it is they've got a rifle and our two guns," growled Hogan.

"What of it? Ain't we a match for them boys? Can't we take 'em by surprise? I'll bet they ain't thinkin' we're within miles of 'em."

"You're talkin' to the p'int, pard. We would be a pair of fools to let that stuff get away from us under the cir-



cumstances. Look around for somethin' that'll make a good club. We'll sneak down there, rush out on 'em, and lay 'em out flatter'n a couple of pancakes. The little kid won't count for nothin'."

In pursuance of Hogan's suggestion, they soon found a couple of stout tree branches which answered for cudgels, then they advanced cautiously, aided by the dusk of the evening, until they had got, unobserved, quite close to the broken-down outfit.

Bruce Hardy and Joe Ramsay were fixing a stout limb of a tree to the axle of the broken wheel, so as to support the front part of the rickety wagon, that they might continue their journey.

They had turned the wagon around, intending to retrace their way, for the boys were now satisfied they had taken the wrong road.

Jack was helping, too, as well as his strength would permit.

Thus the three were gathered in a bunch favorable to the designs of their concealed enemies.

The rifle and the revolvers were under the wagon seat out of reach, for they were unsuspicious of any danger.

Hogan and Hughes, with a chuckle of satisfaction, noted the situation.

They felt the boys were at their mercy, and they lost no time in taking advantage of the fact.

The first hint either Bruce or Joe had of impending danger was a sudden rush of two dark forms from the neighboring hedge.

Then the rude cudgels descended on them with a whack.

Both received glancing blows, for they had instinctively ducked, but the shock was effective enough to stretch them stunned in the road.

Then Hogan seized Jack fiercely by the collar.

"If you utter a sound I'll brain you, you little imp!"

The two ruffians had triumphed again.

## CHAPTER XII.

### PARSONS'S RANCH.

Jack knew enough to keep quiet when he couldn't help himself, though we won't say but he was a well-scared boy.

Hogan pulled a bit of cord from his pocket, tied the boy's hands behind him and then, lifting him up, tossed him into the wagon as if he were a small bag of ore.

"We'd better finish this job," said Hughes, pointing to the trussed-up axle.

"What for? All we want is the two bags of quartz. We can carry 'em, can't we?" replied Hogan.

"What about the boys?"

"Let 'em lie there, of course. What do we want with 'em?"

"You're foolish," replied his companion. "The young un recognized us. Then these chaps will come to bimeby,

make their way to Oro Grande 'tween this and mornin' and the sheriff will out after us with a posse."

"What of it?" responded Hogan. "He won't find us. Parsons'll hide us till things get quiet ag'in."

"I've got a better plan than that."

"Well, spit it out if you have."

"I think we ought'r take the hull outfit, boys and all, over to Parsons's. There we can keep the boys hid away, that is, Parsons can, till we have time enough to ride across to Custer with the quartz and dispose of it. After that we'll go south."

"That's your scheme, is it?"

"Yes. It's a good sight safe'n leavin' that broken-down shack here in the road, and the boys to get off and set the law at our heels."

"Well, mebbe it is, Hughes. I guess Parsons won't object to seein' us through this here affair."

Hogan concluded to follow his companion's suggestion, so the two men repaired the wagon sufficiently to carry them as far as Parsons's, at any rate.

Then they secured the unconscious lads and piled them with little ceremony onto the vehicle, which they turned about and started the mule ahead.

A short distance away a trail led off toward the hills and the men turned the wagon into it, beating the mule at intervals with their sticks to prevent him from falling asleep, as they said.

In the course of twenty minutes they reached the foothills, and presently came upon a long, rambling building, to which was attached a number of outhouses.

This was Parsons's ranch.

It was quite dark by this time.

There were lights in several windows of the central building.

Hogan, who seemed to be at home here, went up to the main door and pounded upon it lustily.

It was opened by a heavily bearded man of perhaps fifty.

"Hello, Hogan!" he ejaculated, with some surprise. "I thought you'd flown the district."

"I hain't gone yet; but I expect to. I s'pose I can reckon on you doin' me a favor?"

"I guess you can. Who's that with you?"

"That's my pard, Hiram Hughes."

"You're both welcome. Got a team, I see."

"Not much of one. A broken-down shack and a lop-eared mule."

"I s'pose you want 'em put up till you're ready to light out again, eh?"

"You'd better break the wagon up and turn the mule loose."

"Why so?" asked Parsons, for such was the identity of the individual to whom they were speaking, in surprise.

"'Cause the outfit don't belong to us. We picked it up along the road yonder."

"What did you bring it here for, then?"

"Step this way and I'll tell you the hull story."

Parsons walked outside and listened to their yarn about the bags of quartz and the boys.



"We want you to stow these boys somewhere so they can't get away for a week. By that time we'll be out of the State, with the price of the quartz in our pockets."

"Who are these boys?"

"I don't know much about 'em, except that they were workin' the surface of the Golden Nugget for what they could find, just as if they owned the claim, which I don't imagine they do," with a chuckle. "They're strangers in the district. Hain't been here more'n a few days, so it ain't likely they'll be missed to any great extent. I guess it's safe enough for you to keep 'em under cover for a week, then take 'em among the hills some night and cast 'em adrift."

"Let's take a look at them," said Parsons. "I'll get a light."

He returned into the house and soon reappeared with a lantern.

While he was away, Hogan and Hughes pulled Bruce and Joe, still unconscious, out of the wagon, and then added Jack to the bunch.

Parsons looked them over critically.

"They seem to be decent sort of chaps," he remarked. "You must have hit those two a pretty hard rap. What's your name, youngster?" he asked of Jack, who had been silently watching the course of events.

"Jack Egan."

"Where do you hail from?"

"New York."

"Who are your companions?"

"Bruce Hardy and Joe Ramsay."

"What brought you to Loon Creek? Did you come alone?"

"Yes, we came alone. Bruce Hardy," and Jack indicated Bruce with his finger, "owns the Golden Nugget claim——"

Parsons gave a low whistle and looked hard at Jack.

"That's all guff," interrupted Hogan. "I don't believe a word of it."

"It's the fact," asserted Jack, stoutly.

"Oh, bottle up!" snarled Hogan. "The idea that a kid like him owns a claim right in the gold belt. All rot. Well, Parsons, if you've seen enough of them chaps, I wish you'd take charge of 'em, and see to it they don't give you leg bail."

"All right. Fetch them along, and I'll show you a safe place to stow them in."

Hogan picked up Bruce, and Hughes, Joe, while Parsons led the way with Jack.

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Jack of the boss of the ranch.

"I'm not goin' to hurt you, sonny. You and your friends are goin' to stay a few days with me. You'll have plenty to eat, and nothin' to do, so you ought to be satisfied. Most boys would be."

"What are you going to keep us for?"

"You ask too many question, young shaver. Talk is cheap, but it's a waste of time. Say nothin' and saw wood, and you'll come out all right," said Parsons.

The boys were taken to a roomy cellar in one of the out-houses.

"They'll be safe enough here," said Parsons, as he bolted the door on the outside. "I'll fetch them something to eat by and by."

Hogan and Hughes seemed to be satisfied with the arrangements, and went back to the house with their host, who introduced them to a well-supplied table, much to their satisfaction, for they hadn't enjoyed a square meal for several days.

After the meal they went outside to remove the two bags of quartz from the wagon.

They found their revolvers under the seat and took possession of them, Hogan also appropriating Bruce's rifle, which was a fine weapon.

The bags were placed in the outhouse and covered up, the wagon dragged out of the way, and the mule stabled for the present.

Then Parsons adjourned with his visitors to the house again, and the three, together with several of the hired ranch men, proceeded to make merry over several bottles of whiskey.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE ROAD TO FREEDOM.

The door had hardly more than closed upon the prisoners before Bruce recovered his senses.

He sat up, looked around in a kind of wonder and spied Jack, who was standing near the lantern left behind by Parsons.

"Hello, Jack! What's happened?"

"Those fellows who tied Joe and me up over at the claim has got hold of us again."

"You don't say! Why, what's the matter with Joe, anyway?" anxiously.

"He got a rap over the head like yourself."

"I thought my head felt kind of funny. It's as sore as a boil back of my left ear. So the rascals hit us, did they?"

"That's what they did, Bruce," said Jack; "they knocked you out for fair."

"And where are we at now?" asked Bruce, glancing around the cellar.

"In the lower part of some building."

"Then they carried us to town?"

"No, they didn't. We're somewhere in the hills."

"In the hills! How far did they bring us? You had your senses and your eyes, didn't you?"

"They tied my hands and chucked me into the cart," replied Jack, "so I didn't see much till I got here. I know they turned the wagon around the way it was facing first, and went on a short distance down the road, when they



turned off into softer ground, and after a lot of jolting they stopped before a house."

"This house, eh?"

"No, not this house, but a bigger one. This is only a small building. There are a number of wagons and farming implements upstairs."

"This is a farm, then?"

"I don't know what it is," said Jack, who then proceeded to tell what occurred after the three of them were yanked out of the cart.

"So they intend to keep us prisoners here a while?"

"That's what the three of them agreed upon. The two chaps Joe tied to the trees at your claim are going to take those bags of quartz to Custer and sell them. Then they're going south."

"You heard them say that?"

"I heard them plain enough."

"I wonder how they managed to free themselves so soon and get on our trail?" mused Bruce, thoughtfully. "I'm afraid we're in a tight box," he added to Jack. "I hate to lose all that gold quartz after the trouble we had breaking it out, though there's plenty more where that came from. It goes against my grain to know that a couple of infernal skunks should get the benefit of it."

Just then Joe stirred, turned partly over and sat up, blinking his eyes at the lantern.

"Say, Bruce," he asked, in a bewildered way, "what's up? Did the wagon fall on me?"

"Hardly, old chappie. A good, stout bit of wood fell against your head, and mine, too, and laid us both out."

"It wasn't a tree, was it?"

"It wasn't a tree. It was a club held by one of those ruffians you tied up to the trees on my property."

"You're fooling, aren't you?"

"What does your head say about it?" asked Bruce, with a grim smile.

"My head feels as if it was swelled up double its ordinary size. Come, now, give me the story straight, will you?"

"Jack can tell you much better than I. I only came around myself a few moments ago."

So Jack went over the ground again for Joe's benefit.

"Oh, I say, this is tough!" ejaculated Joe, when Jack had finished his story.

"Yes, kind of hard luck," agreed Bruce.

"What are we going to do about it?"

"We'll have to put on our thinking caps and consider. To begin with, Jack says we're locked in the cellar of a farm building."

"Say, Jack, take the lantern and examine the premises. I've got a ripping headache, and don't feel equal to doing anything just now," said Joe.

"Never mind, Jack," said Bruce, getting on his feet, "I'll do the investigating."

He took up the lantern and carefully examined all four sides of the cellar.

"There doesn't seem to be any way of getting out of this

place except by the door, and that's secured on the outside," was Bruce's conclusions, after he finished his survey.

"Then we're like three mice in a trap," said Joe, with a sickly grin.

"I won't answer for the mice, but the trap is plain enough."

They talked in this way for a couple of hours, when they heard footsteps above, and presently the bolt of the cellar door was drawn and a full-bearded man appeared in the opening with a pitcher and a small basket of cold food, which he put down near the door.

He regarded Bruce and Joe with some curiosity, and then, without a word, closed the door, rebolted it and left the building as he had come.

"That's the man they called Parsons," said Jack. "I guess he's the boss of these diggings."

"Well, there isn't much to chose between him and the other two," remarked Joe. "The three of them look capable of a good deal of mischief."

After eating the provisions furnished them the boys talked a while longer, and then stretched out and managed to go to sleep, despite the hardness of their bed.

Sunday morning dawned clear and fair.

Bruce was the first to open his eyes on a new day.

It took him several minutes to recall the incidents of the previous evening and to realize the situation.

It was now broad daylight, but the cellar was just as dark as if it was still night, or at least almost so.

Over in a corner a couple of slanting gleams of sunshine made their way through cracks in the ceiling.

Bruce, noticing that his companions were still asleep, went over to that corner and looked up.

The ceiling was low and came within reach of his hand when extended.

"I believe this is a trap-door," he said to himself, with some interest in such a discovery. "I wonder if it is bolted on the upper side."

Of course the only way to establish the fact one way or the other was to investigate, and Bruce, being of an inquiring turn of mind just then, at any rate, put up his hand and pressed against the supposed trap.

To the boy's great delight the wood yielded at one end, and up went the flap on its hinges.

A flood of light shone into the cellar from an open window above, facing the east.

The sudden transition from darkness to bright sunlight naturally made Bruce blink for a minute or two.

Then he secured a grip on the dusty floor above and pulled himself up—an easy gymnastic feat for him, as he had practiced just such a thing hundreds of times in the gymnasium at Hurricane Hall.

Holding his chin above the flooring he looked about and saw a number of farm implements close at hand, a couple of light spring wagons, and a variety of small articles used in the cultivation of the soil.

"I guess this is the outhouse of a farm, all right," he



thought, as he let himself drop back into the cellar again in order to rest his muscles.

In a few minutes he pulled himself up again, this time bent on getting up through the trap if he could.

A struggle or two and he got his elbow out on to the floor. The second elbow followed easier.

Then he gripped the spokes of a wagon wheel within his reach and in a minute got one knee on the floor, and the rest was easy.

The place was deserted at that hour.

Bruce walked about and took in the lay of the building.

Then he mounted to the open window and glanced outside.

The undulating landscape in the direction of Oro Grande lay before him with the sun shining in his face.

The town itself was easily to be made out some six miles away.

Bruce cautiously stuck his head out of the window and took in the surroundings at that side.

The ranch house lay two hundred yards to his left.

Smoke was rising from one of its chimneys, showing that some of the inmates were already astir.

A man suddenly hove into view with a couple of pails of water.

He walked toward a back door and disappeared inside.

Then Bruce saw three men come out of another small out-building not far away.

He recognized the man who had brought them the food on the previous evening, and the two rascals who were the cause of all the trouble which had come to himself and his companions.

They appeared to be in earnest consultation.

Bruce thought it prudent to get out of sight.

"Well, I've found a road to freedom if nothing turns up to block it," he muttered, in a tone of satisfaction.

He looked about for something to render their exit from the cellar easier, for he knew he would have to return below for a while, at any rate, for there was no telling when the bearded man might visit them again.

He found an oblong box, which he dropped through the opening, and then he pulled the trap after him as he let himself down into the cellar.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A LUCKY CHANCE.

Bruce woke Joe up and told him how he had found a way out of their prison.

"Come, that's jolly! It doesn't look as if they'd keep us here a week, as they propose to do."

"I should say not. But I'm afraid it won't be prudent for us to make such a move till night."

"That fact doesn't worry me much," replied Joe, with a grin, which was lost in the gloom.

"It worries me this much: Those rascals may start off this morning with our bags of quartz. Unless we could give them immediate chase the stuff will probably be lost to us."

"That's true, too," admitted Joe, scratching his head, in some perplexity. "How are we to know when they do start?"

"By keeping a cautious watch from the window above, occasionally," said Bruce. "Somebody will no doubt bring us something to eat before long, then it is probable we may not be molested again for several hours. As it is Sunday, this building will not be opened up, I should imagine. That will afford us the run of the place with very small chance of discovery. The window overlooks all the other buildings, I guess. That gives us a fair chance, if we are sufficiently watchful, to find out what goes on in the immediate vicinity."

"Well, suppose we discover those chaps going away with their plunder in broad daylight—what then?" asked Joe.

"Our course of action must necessarily depend on circumstances in that event. I am hoping they won't make a start until dark. In which case it should be easy for us to drop out of the window and follow them."

"Without weapons?" queried Joe. "And those chaps armed? Say, what show would we have?"

"Joe," replied Bruce, impressively, "you and I climbed Dead Man's Ledge, didn't we, and painted a double H above the other fellows' M?"

"We did, bet your life!" answered Joe, enthusiastically.

"Then I think we ought to be equal to the present emergency."

"Put it there, Bruce!" cried his chum, extending his hand. "We'll prove that we are."

Then Jack sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Gee! I was dreaming I was home," he said.

"Well, your dream will come true one of these days, but just now you're a long way from your own fireside," snickered Joe.

"I'm hungry," said the boy, wistfully.

"Bruce and I are suffering from the same complaint. We are expecting the caterer at any moment."

"I don't think that's funny at all," replied Jack. "I don't believe you're half as hungry as I am."

There was the sound of footsteps above.

"Well, talk of Old Nick and you're sure to see his hoofs. I'll bet a whole dollar that is the man with our feed now?" And Joe proved to be right.

The bolt was drawn and the man with the beard appeared with a dish of bacon and eggs, some bread and butter and a jug of milk.

"Here's your breakfast," he said, putting the dishes on the floor out of his basket. "Fetch the jug and the dish I brought here last night."

Jack did as he requested.

"Say, don't be in a rush," said Bruce; "I'd like to ask you a question or two."

"I'll talk with you later on," replied Parsons, roughly. "I haven't any time to bother with you now."



"Thanks!" Joe yelled after him as the door closed behind the man. "Won't he be mad when he comes here later on and finds we've flown the coop?" and the speaker chuckled as he pictured the man's consternation.

As Jack reached for a slice of home-made bread and one-third of the bacon and eggs, the lantern, which had been burning dim for some time, gave an expiring flash and went out.

"Dar's a dark man comin' wid a bundle," sang Joe, fishing for his share in the gloom. "Here's hoping we eat at Stetson's to-night for a change," he continued, lifting the jug to his lips and taking a long pull.

After breakfast Bruce led the way to the trap-door, listened cautiously for a few moments, and then believing the coast was clear above, lifted the flap.

The box enabled them to get out of the cellar with ease.

"You'd better stay near the trap, Jack, and the moment you hear one of us whistle, drop down out of sight," said Bruce.

That was equivalent to an order for the boy, so he remained with his legs dangling down the trap.

Bruce and Joe took turns gazing from the window, conversing together in low tones, or one of them would go back and keep Jack company for a time.

So the morning passed away, and there was no sign of preparation for departure on the part of Hogan and Hughes, who sat in front of the small outhouse where the bags of quartz had been deposited, and smoked their pipes almost continuously.

A part of the time they enjoyed the society of Parsons.

Finally all three went into the house in answer to a call to dinner.

"Maybe they'll make a move after the meal," whispered Joe.

Half an hour later Parsons came out with a basket on his arm.

"Sneak!" said Joe, "here comes our dinner."

In two minutes the boys were in the cellar again with the trap closed.

Parsons found them stretched out apparently asleep in the gloom.

He took away the extinguished lantern and left a freshly lighted one in its place.

Not a word passed between Parsons and his prisoners.

The boys ate their dinner in a hurry and went above again.

The afternoon was warm, and as nothing seemed to be doing without, the droning of the insects made the boys drowsy.

Joe and Jack both went to sleep, but Bruce was too prudent to follow their example.

Along about five o'clock a couple of stout mules were saddled and tied to the corner of the out-building, where the quartz was.

After a while Hogan and Hughes appeared with Parsons, the bags of stolen quartz were fetched out of the building and attached to the mules, back of the saddles.

Then the two rascals mounted the animals, bid Parsons good-by, and slowly trotted off down a trail which led well to the south of Oro Grande.

"I'm afraid our name is mud," said Joe, as he and Bruce watched the rascals depart, without seeing any way of following them.

Five minutes after they had disappeared among the trees of a neighboring wood, two horsemen dashed up from the direction of Oro Grande, dismounted, and were warmly greeted by Parsons.

A man led the horses some little distance away to a grassy spot and staked them.

"One of those newcomers is Mr. Bradshaw, promoter of mining leases," said Joe, and Bruce nodded, showing he, too, had recognized the man.

The other was Bromley, his gambling partner, but the boys had never seen him before.

Parsons led his visitors into his house, the man who had staked the horses went away somewhere, and now there was nobody in sight.

"Here's our chance, Joe," said Bruce, in suppressed excitement. "A little nerve, backed by a little luck, and those horses will be ours. I'll take Jack up behind."

"Gee!" cried Joe, "I'm with you. If we're going to do it we haven't a minute to lose."

"Call Jack, then."

Out of the window they slipped, one after the other, in a twinkling, and dashed for the grazing animals.

They were not observed.

In another minute they were galloping across the grass toward the wood.

## CHAPTER XV.

### RECOVERY OF THE QUARTZ.

As they passed into the shelter of the trees, the boys glanced back.

There wasn't a sign that their daring move had been noticed by any one about the ranch.

"Gee!" grinned Joe, "there won't be a thing doing here in a little while."

Bruce nodded and directed his animal into the trail taken by Hogan and Hughes a quarter of an hour before.

For a while they went ahead at a smart pace in single file, then Bruce saw, half a mile ahead, the two rascals who were carrying away their quartz.

Of course, it wouldn't do to ride the fellows down, as they were armed and the boys were not, so Bruce brought his horse to a walk."

"I've just caught a sight of them some distance ahead," he said, over his shoulder, to Joe. "What I propose to do is to stalk these chaps if we can. They're bound to make frequent stops to rest their mules, for the animals are carrying a heavy load. Our only chance to save follow-



ing them all the way to Custer is to surprise them during one of their resting spells."

"That's just my idea," coincided Joe. "They won't suspect they're being followed—least of all by us, whom they consider scooped up in that cellar. If we succeed in nabbing them, won't it be great?"

Two hours passed, the relative distance being maintained between pursuers and pursued, as the boys could tell by occasional sights of the rascals.

But now it began to grow dark and the difficulties attending the pursuit were bound to be greater.

"How can we tell when they decide to rest their mules?" asked Joe. "The chances are we may come suddenly upon them without warning, and in that case our bread is likely to be all dough, for they'll be on their guard."

"I've been thinking of that, Joe, and it is a serious matter, I must admit. But I can't see how we're going to get around it. It looked easy at the start to trail these chaps, but a practical demonstration puts quite a different face on the matter. I don't see but we must trust a good bit to luck."

"Those rascals know the country, while we do not. They may leave the trail and thus give us the slip while we are blindly following the beaten way. We don't even know the road to Custer. It seems to me there are many chances in favor of our being lost in the wilderness. We may ride twenty or thirty miles before we meet with a house. They seem to be few and far between in this locality."

The boys now proceeded with much caution, for they felt all at sea, as it were.

They hadn't met or seen a sign of any one, except distant glimpses of the men they were pursuing, since leaving Parsons's ranch.

The country all around looked lonesome and bare.

And now that it was dark the prospect was far from inviting.

The horses' hoofs made scarcely any noise along the soft trail, and this was in their favor.

"What's that?" asked Jack, who was mounted behind Bruce, suddenly.

"What's what?" answered Bruce, half turning in his saddle.

"I saw a flash of light yonder," replied Jack, pointing to a spot a short way ahead by the side of the trail.

"What did it look like?"

"It looked like—there it is again!" cried Jack.

Bruce saw the gleam among the trees.

The light flashed up and died away several times and then went out.

"Those fellows have stopped to rest, and that's one of them lighting his pipe," thought Bruce.

He reined in and allowed Joe to come up alongside, when he told his chum what he and Jack had seen, and what he believed it meant.

"I saw it, too," said Joe. "We'd better go forward and investigate, letting Jack hold the horses here."

"That's what we'll do," agreed Bruce, and the boys dismounted.

"I don't see anything on the ground that would answer for a club," said Joe, peering around in the dark.

"Pick up a good-sized stone, then," answered Bruce. "We are pretty accurate throwers of a baseball, we ought to be able to make a stone hit its mark at short range."

Each found a suitable missile and then cautiously advanced in the gloom.

Presently they heard voices ahead, and, following the sound, soon came upon Hogan and Hughes stretched out on the turf, while the mules were nibbling the grass close by.

They were both smoking and taking things easy.

The boys watched their indistinct figures, scarcely perceptible even when the glow of their pipes threw a momentary radiance about their faces.

"Well, what are we going to do?" whispered Joe, in his friend's ear.

Bruce didn't answer—he was considering.

"Where are them mules gettin' to?" said Hogan, suddenly, sitting up.

The animals had been gradually moving further and further away.

"They won't go far," replied Hughes, lazily, striking a match after refilling his pipe.

Bruce gripped his companion's arm.

"What's the matter?" asked Joe, softly.

"That rifle of mine is leaning against a tree close to Hogan, who just spoke."

"How do you know?"

"Just saw it by the glare of the match. If I could get my hands on it we might be able to do something."

"I'll tell you what. You sneak up as close to the tree as you dare. When I think you've had time enough to get into position, I'll fire this stone at the rascals. That'll startle them, and in the confusion of the moment you can rush forward and grab the rifle, at the same time I'll let them have the other stone and try to do some execution with it."

Bruce agreed to adopt Joe's plan, although it was pretty risky.

Pressing his chum's hand and relinquishing the stone he held, he moved away and vanished in the gloom.

Joe waited several minutes to make sure that Bruce would have time enough to crawl forward with the necessary caution, then he took aim as well as he could at the spot where the ruffians were lounging, and sent the stone through the air as though he were firing a baseball from short to first base.

An awful howl came from the lips of Hogan as the stone landed on his right shoulder with a thud.

His arm was fairly paralyzed.

"What in thunder is the matter with you?" roared Hughes, jumping up in wonder and perhaps consternation.

Bruce, who was waiting for this change in affairs, dashed for the tree, only a few feet from where he was crouching, and seized the rifle.

Hughes, however, saw his shadowy figure, and quick as a flash drew his revolver and fired.



The ball whizzed unpleasantly close to Bruce's head, and he dropped down behind the bushes, cocking his gun as he did so.

As Hughes leaned forward, trying to make out who the intruder was who had so suddenly appeared and then vanished just as quick, Joe launched the second stone at him.

It struck him also on the shoulder, but glancing upward spent the rest of its force against his head.

With a groan he sank down in his tracks and lay quite still.

Hogan was alternately groaning and cursing in a frightful manner.

Bruce crawled back to his chum.

"I think they're both knocked out," he said. "We'll jump in now and finish the job. If Hogan tries to shoot I'll put a ball into him."

But Hogan had no power in his arm to draw his weapon when the boys advanced upon him.

Hughes couldn't help him, for he was lying senseless.

So with scant ceremony Bruce poked the muzzle of his rifle into Hogan's face and called on him to surrender.

"Who the dickens are you, and what do you want?" demanded the ruffian, not recognizing his assailants in the dark.

"We're the boys you robbed of our quartz, and we're going to take you back to Oro Grande and make an example of you," replied Bruce, sternly.

Hogan was stupefied on hearing this, and while he was glaring up at Bruce, Joe bent down and yanked his revolver out of his belt.

"I'll bring Jack and the horses up," said Joe.

While he was gone, Hogan uttered the most terrible threats against the two of them.

"We were fools not to have killed you two and settled you for good and all," he gritted. "We won't make that mistake again."

"You won't get the chance again to try it on," replied Bruce, curtly.

Joe brought Jack and the horses on the scene.

Both of the ruffians were securely bound and tied upon the mules' backs.

"Now for Oro Grande," said Bruce, cheerfully.

"That's right, provided we can find our way there," replied Joe, doubtfully.

At that moment three horsemen dashed up out of the gloom without the slightest warning and narrowly missed a collision with the mules.

"Hello! Who's there?" cried one of the riders as the newcomers drew rein.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### CONCLUSION.

The voice sounded reassuringly in the boys' ears, and Bruce answered:

"We're three boys, strangers in this district, and we want to find our way back to Oro Grande.

"All right; we're going there. You can follow us."

"Wait a moment," interposed another voice, and the speaker walked his horse over toward Bruce. "You say you are three boys? What are your names?"

Before Bruce could answer Joe shouted:

"I'm Joe Ramsay. Is that you, father?"

"Why, Joe!" exclaimed the major, in genuine surprise. "What are you doing away out here?"

He dismounted quickly, rushed up to his son and embraced him.

"It's a long story, pop. I'll tell you on the way back," replied Joe, tickled to death at meeting his father, whom he hadn't seen for more than a year.

"Hello!" spoke up a third member of the new arrivals. "What's the meaning of these two men being bound on these mules?"

"They're a pair of rascals who stole some of our property and we tracked them out here and then surprised and took them prisoners," explained Bruce.

"Well done, young man," said the gentleman, approvingly. "I admire your nerve and courage."

Joe introduced Bruce and Jack to his father, and all having remounted their animals the party started off for their destination at a pace which permitted the laden mules to keep up with them.

Major Ramsay and his son led the way, and Joe detailed their series of experiences since they arrived at Loon Creek.

His father was manifestly astonished at the story.

Bruce, on his part, recounted their adventures to the other two gentlemen, who rode on either side of him, while Jack brought up with the mules in the rear of the procession.

"Well," remarked one of Bruce's listeners, "you boys certainly have had quite a stirring time of it since you came into the wild and woolly Northwest."

"I think we have, sir," agreed the boy.

"For tenderfoots, as we call newcomers, there doesn't seem to be many flies on you," spoke up the other gentleman.

"I think we know how to take care of ourselves," grinned Bruce.

"You surely do. And so you are the owner of the Golden Nugget claim, about which there has been so much speculation since Loon Creek has come into the public eye again?"

"I am the owner, though the property stands in my father's name. As he is dead, I am his natural heir."

"Just so. Well, you may rely on Major Ramsay, your friend's father, to put the matter in proper shape for you to reap the benefit. The claim must be of great value, I'm thinking, when you say you unearthed a rich ledge of gold-bearing quartz so close to the surface, not speaking of the nuggets and gold dust you washed out of the creek."

"I think so, sir," answered Bruce; "and I'm not an experienced judge, either."



"Major Ramsay will go over the ground for you, and his verdict will establish a satisfactory basis to work upon. Of course you will form a company under the major's directions. Who is your guardian?"

"My guardian, Edward Harlow, my mother's brother, died only a few days before I started West."

"Then you will have to have another, as you are a minor. Major Ramsay will attend to that."

It was after midnight when the party rode up and dismounted before the Oro Grande Hotel, and the appearance of the mules with their singular burdens created something of a sensation.

"These horses belong to a man named Horace Bradshaw and another man," said Bruce to Stetson, the hotel proprietor. "I will consider it a favor if you see that they are returned to their owners."

Hogan and Hughes were turned over to the sheriff of the district and were put into the town jail, pending their trial.

Before that event came on the ruffians managed to effect their escape with assistance from the outside.

For a while after their disappearance Bruce and Joe felt some uneasiness lest the rascals should make some desperate attempt to get back at them, but as time passed they accepted the general opinion in town that the villains had left Loon Creek for good.

At any rate, they never saw nor heard from them again.

Major Ramsay accompanied Bruce and Joe to the Golden Nugget claim next morning and went over the ground pretty thoroughly.

"You have a good thing here, Bruce," he said, finally. "This claim will turn up millions of the yellow stuff."

"I am glad to know that, Major Ramsay," replied the boy, with sparkling eyes.

"And I am glad, too, that you have struck such luck," said Joe, heartily.

"Thank you, old fellow. I mean that you and Jack also shall have a share in the Golden Nugget."

"Not for nothing," replied Joe. "Father will buy me an interest in the company which, of course, will be formed."

"Well, at any rate, you shall come in on the ground floor, Joe. Now, Major Ramsay, I hope you will take charge of my interests."

"Why, of course he will. Won't you, father?" cried Joe.

"Certainly. It will give me great pleasure to be of assistance to our young friend, Bruce."

"Do you object to acting as my guardian until I reach twenty-one, sir?" asked Bruce.

"I will do so. I will see a lawyer on the subject this afternoon."

"Thank you, sir," replied Bruce, gratefully, for he felt sure his interests would be secure in the hands of Major Ramsay.

At the major's request, Sheriff Andrews went out to Parsons's ranch to arrest the owner for his share in the quartz conspiracy.

But he did not find Parsons.

Indeed, it was long before the ranch owner was seen in the district again, when he managed to square himself by begging the boys' pardon and serving fifteen days in jail.

As for Horace Bradshaw, promoter of leases and gambler, whatever designs he had upon Bruce Hardy and the Golden Nugget claim, he prudently kept in the background as soon as he saw that Major Ramsay was in charge of the boy's interests, for the major knew what a crook he was, and they were sworn enemies anyway.

In due time the Golden Nugget Gold Mining Company was formed.

Major Ramsay became its president and manager, which office was eventually to revert to the real owner of the controlling interest—Bruce Hardy.

That fall the boys returned East, Bruce and Joe entering Princeton College, while Jack Egan was provided with a position in the financial district.

Jack was presented with enough shares in the Golden Nugget to assure him handsome dividends a year later.

The Western adventures of Bruce and his chum, as well as the fact that Bruce was certain to become a wealthy mine owner before his four years at the university were over, made both of the boys interesting figures at Princeton.

They showed up strong in their studies and strong in the college athletics.

They bore their honors with due modesty.

On the day both graduated, Bruce became president and Joe secretary of the Golden Nugget Company.

"Well, old man," said Joe, while they were packing up their things in their room, preparatory to leaving Princeton for good, "that document you received in the guard-house that Sunday at Hurricane Hall proved to be worth a fortune, didn't it?"

"Yes," replied Bruce Hardy, beamingly, "it was A GOOD THING."

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THE END.

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